

**TEXT IS CROSS IN
THE BOOK**

B962-1

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for four weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



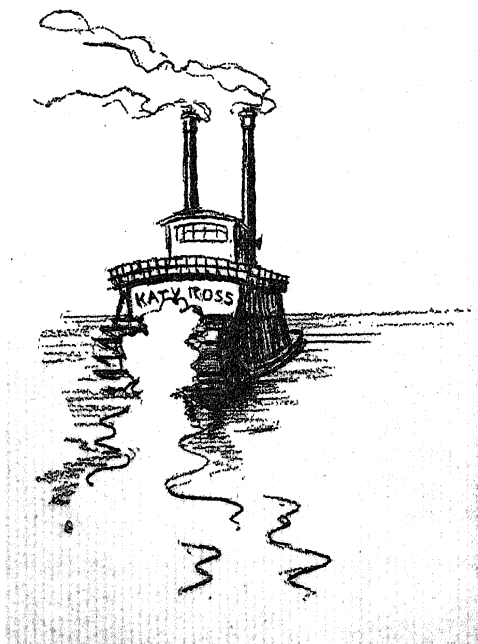
Public Library
Kansas City, Mo.

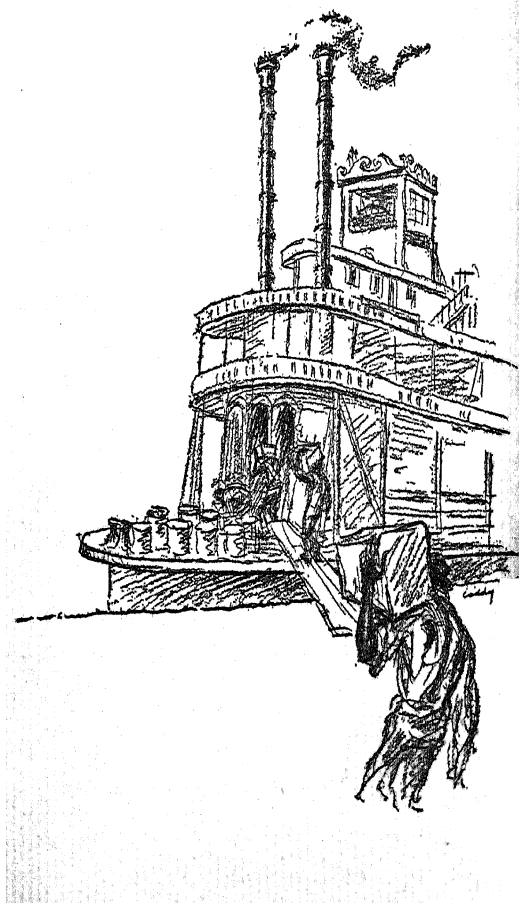
Keep Your Card in This Pocket

MISSISSIPPI

NO

$$284 + 18 = 302$$





MISSISSIPPI

Ben Lucien Burman

Illustrated by Alice Caddy



Cosmopolitan Book Corporation
New York, 1929

• • • COPYRIGHT, 1929, BY
COSMOPOLITAN BOOK CORPORATION
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING
THAT OF TRANSLATION INTO FOREIGN
LANGUAGES INCLUDING THE SCANDINAVIAN
PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. BY J. J. LITTLE
& IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK

First Edition

TO
ARTHUR AND HENRIETTA HILL





TO BERNARD SOUTHGATE, SUPERINTENDENT OF LIGHT-
HOUSES OF THE FOURTEENTH INLAND WATERWAYS DIS-
TRICT AND HIS SON BILL; TO RED, ENGINEER OF THE
GREENBRIER; TO CAPTAIN MICHAELS OF THE HARRY LEE;
AND TO ALL HIS STEAMBOAT AND SHANTY-BOAT FRIENDS
ON THE MISSISSIPPI AND OHIO RIVERS WHO SO GENER-
OUSLY AIDED IN THE COLLECTION OF MATERIAL FOR THIS
NOVEL THE WRITER WISHES TO ACKNOWLEDGE HIS DEEP-
FELT GRATITUDE.

Ben Lucien Burman



CHAPTER ONE

CAPTAIN LILLY stood on the shadowy Beaver Slough wharf-boat and watched a half-dozen grunting, burlaped negroes roll an endless procession of nail kegs from the vessel moored alongside. The obscurity, coupled with his tiny stature and cottony beard, gave him the appearance of a gnome directing demons toiling in some hidden cavern. But he was a genial gnome, with twinkling blue eyes and cheerful friendly mouth; even when he called out an order to spur on a lagging rouser his voice was good-humored.

A bee flew up and buzzed at his watch chain, a chain formed of a number of small strips of bone strung together in the fashion of a rope ladder. He drove the insect away and began polishing the ornament with a neat bandanna.

MISSISSIPPI

As he did so, a lanky individual curled inside a coil of rope near by stretched out a lazy hand, and inspected the decoration curiously.

"You been doing something to it, ain't you, captain?" he demanded.

The old man reached up with the handkerchief to push back the hollyhock drooping brilliantly from the coonskin cap over his eye. "No, I ain't done nothing much. Just whitening her up a little with some chalk Miss Goldie give me when I was passing the schoolhouse last week. It was looking kind of yellow and I don't like to see things going that way, specially something like this that's my own rib."

"Guess it's got a right to be yellow, seeing how you've had it since '64. But it sure makes a pretty chain. I ain't seen nothing as fine as that even on them salesmen fellows comes into the Busy Bee Restaurant down in Pine City. A fellow just can't get tired of looking at it."

The old man beamed under the praise. "That's what I told them doctors when they cut the rib out of me. They didn't want to let me have it at first, but when I asked 'em what was the good of a fellow getting shot in a war if he couldn't bring something nice home to remember it by, they give in without no more arguing."

MISSISSIPPI

The lanky one, whose glazed, violently scented hair advertised him as the proprietor of Capps Beaver Slough Tonsorial Parlors, released the chain and gazed at its owner in skinny admiration. "You're sure a good one, captain. Yessir, you're a good one. Ain't no match for you in Beaver County, ain't no match in the whole valley, I guess, when it comes to thinking up things. Turkey Biggers up at Granny Run thinks he's something, and Zep Wethers is getting so he expects people to tip their hats to him just 'cause he put them tin spiders down the backs of them insurance fellows was up at the hotel last week. But all their doings is just smart-aleckness; the things you figure out is pretty, and never hurt nobody. The way you got that dog and cat of yours trained for instance. Or the way you keep them Scroggins twins from fingering the bright work of the boat by daring your pilot to touch it and then tearing out his glass eye. Seeing either of 'em's enough to make a potato-bug blow the spots off himself with laughing." He lifted himself slowly to a sitting position and yawning wearily, put his socked feet into his cadaverous shoes. "Well, guess I'll have to be getting up to the shop. There's a preacher come in on the bus saying he'd be wanting a shave afterwhile. He's wearing a silk shirt,

MISSISSIPPI

but I'll bet he won't pay me more than a nickel. Guess the shirt was give to him."

The old man watched him shamble up the levee. Giving the chain a final dab with the handkerchief, he drew out his watch, holding it a moment longer than was necessary to gaze lovingly at the eight wonders of the world ticking past a circular hole at the base of the dial. "Eight o'clock," he said. "Time we're starting for Hanging Dog."

Walking briskly aboard the steamboat, he mounted to the narrow, uppermost deck known to rivermen as the texas, and clanged the great bell suspended before the pilot-house. As in response the pilot popped his head out the window, revealing a visage knotted like a sweet potato and studded with one green and one rigid yellowish eye. An instant later the head popped back into its glassy box; the tattered rousters on the wharf flung down the last nail kegs and scrambled onto the swaying gang-plank; the dazzling white vessel swung and began to chug laboriously up the wide willow-fringed river. Steadily she steamed alongside the high Beaver Slough levee, past the ghastly half-buried wreck of a barge where two broken timbers with frayed ropes hanging beneath rose like gibbets over the yellow water, past Burning Elm Light at the tip of a long

MISSISSIPPI

sandy bar, then chugged around it into Granny Fork, the narrow tributary which formed the highway to Granny Run and the microscopic hamlets above.

An impudent little terrier trotted up to the old man and frenziedly wagging an absurd fragment of a tail began tugging at the bottoms of his corduroy trousers. He scratched its ragged ears an instant, then taking a leisurely glance at the snaky channel ahead, left the dog on deck and strode downstairs to his cabin. Here in a chair a boy was sitting, bent over a river chart spread out on the sofa before him. He was a youth of perhaps sixteen, with fiery unkempt red hair and a face so freckled it might have been cut from an orange-polka-dotted dress. It was a face as attractive, as merry, as the captain's, with gray eyes flashing humorously and lips curved round a broken tooth in a permanent grin. So radiant, so contagious was his gaiety it made almost unnoticed the ugly steel braces fixed to his right leg.

His clothing was as cheerful as his countenance. His trousers were of a flamboyant green with two rows of huge mother-of-pearl buttons completely encircling the waist; his vivid pink shirt bore on the breast three button photographs with gilded legends

MISSISSIPPI

advising the beholder to vote for the stately gentlemen there portrayed at the coming primary election; his collar was celluloid with a rainbow necktie so perfectly formed it was certainly of the hook-on variety; in each of his cuffs was a pair of linked golden hearts.

The old man walked to the sofa and affectionately squeezed the boy's pink-clad shoulder.

"What you studying today, States?"

The youth folded up the map. "Trying to learn that section between Chinaman Light and Paddy Hen. But it's sure mighty hard on a fellow's head. Them bars and chutes there's enough to drive you crazy."

"You'll learn 'em all right. Same way as you learned the others."

He reached over the boy to the wall and straightened the framed souvenir of the St. Louis Exposition where on a silk handkerchief gleamed a phosphorescent Tower of Jewels. "Guess you better be going up and relieving Buttereye pretty soon. Says the mice was a-eating the straw in his pillow last night again and he ain't slept well."

"All right, pap."

"Before you go, what you think about a little music? Ain't nothing like a little music when you're starting up a river."

MISSISSIPPI

States drew a harmonica from his pocket. "What'll I play you?"

The old man hesitated. "Well, 'course there's 'Drunkard's Daughter' and 'course there's 'The Little Rosewood Casket,' but then there's 'Cripple Creek,' ain't there, and that's sure the best. I guess you better play 'Cripple Creek,' same as every day. Socks and breeches wears out when you use 'em, but the longer you hear a piece of music the better it gets. Looks to me it's sense to hear one piece you know is good all the time instead of changing every minute and being bound to hear a lot of bad ones."

The boy put the instrument to his mouth. Gaily he began to sweep it across his lips, beating out the time with his crippled foot, while the old man leaned back in his chair and in a high wheezy voice reminiscent of the steaming of a teakettle, sang through his crescent mustaches:

"Roll your breeches to your knees,
I'll wade Cripple Creek when I please.
Ain't but one thing I done wrong,
I stayed in Cripple Creek a day too long."

The music and the steamy singing ceased.

The captain's face was rapturous. "Prettiest music ever wrote, that is, prettiest ever wrote. Funny, when

MISSISSIPPI

I was in St. Louis for the exposition, them big orchestra fellows they had there didn't play it once. But I was talking to a fellow worked in a livery stable and he said most of them was foreigners, so I s'pose they couldn't play it."

"Guess that's right, pap."

"Well, if it's worth doing once it's worth doing again. Music ain't like socks. Let her have it."

Three jovial verses had followed the first when from the bow of the boat came the explosive sound of shattering glass. The old man broke off his song and darted outside. The boy came limping after.

The vessel was passing close to the mouth of a shallow bay along whose weedy edges a score of dilapidated shanty boats lay bleakly at their moorings. The captain's face purpled with rage, his snowy jaws trembled, his silvery, projecting eyebrows upraised like the horns of a charging bull. Fiercely his eyes ranged from the nearest shanties to the shore, apparently searching for someone in hiding. He found nothing and shook his fist passionately. Motionless he stood at the rail, watching until the shabby dwellings faded into the hot horizon, then as his passion faded into a withered grimness, plodded with the boy up the stairway and reached the texas. He halted as his foot struck against a

MISSISSIPPI

great dagger of glass shining on the white boards, went on into the pilot-house and saw the jagged hole in the window from which it had been splintered. His face flamed with fury once more, then relapsed into its shriveled gloom.

"It's getting too much for a human to stand," he muttered. "Too much for a human to stand."

The steersman with the face of a sweet potato glanced up and unmoved sped the boat past a frog-covered island. "Looks like them shanty-boaters is wanting trouble," he remarked, utilizing the newly created hole to spit a mouthful of tobacco juice cleanly over the side. "Breaking two windows in less than a month, besides all the stealing off the boat they've been doing. Sheriff'll have to be paying 'em another visit. Looks like the last one ain't done much good."

"Nothing's going to do no good . . . until they're laying in their graves."

States, beside him, stooped and picked up a stone lying near the wheel. His grin had vanished, his freckles were a somber gray. "Here's what they done it with," he flashed. "Same as last time. Got to take guns to them fellows, that's all."

Stonily the old man lifted out a triangular fragment from the window and passed a finger over a

MISSISSIPPI

milky edge. "Shooting just one ain't going to help. We got to drive 'em off the river. Ain't going to be no peace till we do."

"Wasn't no excuse for rock-throwing today," the pilot went on. "Maybe last time they done it I was shaking up the shanties a little, but this morning I was being mighty particular to go slow past 'em, and the waves we was making wouldn't rock a collar box, let alone a shanty-boat. Coal-stealing and robbing the wharves and getting the rousters drunk on poison whisky I can figure out, 'cause it's to get money. But this here's just plain spite work."

"Stealing and law-breaking and spiting a steam-boater is all a shantyman knows."

"Guess that's right, cap. Well, maybe they'll be getting run out quicker than we figure. Beaver Slough folks is getting mighty hot against 'em. Long as it's the steamboats that's getting picked on, they don't get so excited, but I was up at the barber shop yesterday, and everybody's saying how it's the shanty people that's doing all the holding up on the Hanging Dog road. Parson Lodey got the folks considerable stirred up about 'em Sunday. Said they was limbs of Satan and even their church meetings was so low down they was defaming the Lord. 'Course if they get run out, they'll come back same as they

MISSISSIPPI

done when they got run out five years ago. A shanty-boater's got more lives than a cat in a cotton bale. But while they're gone you're rid of 'em."

Captain Lilly did not reply to these observations, but bending over, began removing the remainder of the broken glass and laying it in a pile on the floor. The boy joined him. As they worked their spirits lifted. The old man's horny eyebrows relaxed, his crescent mustaches began to droop amiably once more over his kindly lips. The work was soon finished. Sitting down in a chair, he petted the terrier, which came nuzzling against his hand, took out a corn-cob pipe and reached down to strike a match against the wall. As he did so a fly buzzed up from beneath his hand. Instantly the dog grew taut; jerking his head toward a silky white cat dozing in a corner, he barked excitedly, and pointed as though he had sighted a hare. The first bark whipped the cat to her feet. Like an ivory arrow she sped into the air, caught the insect in her flashing paws and dropping to the floor again, carried the captive to her withered master. The dog came trotting to join her. Triumphantlly the two animals sat down at either side of the old man's chair and stared up into his face, their eyes bright with expectation.

MISSISSIPPI

All traces of the captain's gloom vanished in a hearty chuckle. From a sticky bag he counted out eight "red drops" and dotted them on his palm. The confections were swiftly blotted out by two darting tongues. He dismissed both the beggars with a rough caress. Smoking a few moments in silence, he turned to the boy.

"How about playing a piece, States? Ain't nothing like a good piece of music to get you cheerful again after you've been roused up. Crying over spilt milk never did a cow no good."

The boy polished the harmonica against his sleeve. "What'll I play, pap?"

"Well . . . 'course there's 'Drunkard's Daughter' and 'course there's 'The Little Rosewood Casket' and a lot of other ones . . . but then there's 'Cripple Creek,' ain't there? I guess you better play that."

When the music ended, both were radiant. States wrapped the instrument in a square of cloth. "You and me's mighty happy on the Morning Glory, ain't we, pappy?"

"Snug as bugs in a rug, son."

"Rather be a steamboater with you on the Morning Glory than anything else in the world. Don't see how a fellow could ever leave a steamboat. All day long just stand up in the pilot-house and tell stories

MISSISSIPPI

and watch the niggers cutting up, and then when night comes, sit out and listen to the river singing, so soft you can kind of imagine it's a old lady, with the willows on shore playing the organ for her, and the crickets chirping like them rattle things that Spanish dancer had was at the picture show a couple of years ago. As pretty as that dollar-and-a-half phonograph record they plays Christmas time down at the Busy Bee. Prettier maybe. I tell you, if I had to get off the Morning Glory I'd just as soon die."

"River is a beautiful thing. More than that she's a kind of holy thing. Don't need to go to church when you're on the river."

"Sometimes you seem to me you was kind of part of the river, pappy. Your hair's white like the cotton fields beside her, and you're brown and wrinkled like the waves is, and most of the time you're happy and laughing, the way the river is in summer. And then sometimes you get wild and raging, and a person don't know just what you're going to do, the way the river is in flood time."

"Guess you're about right, States. Guess you can't be on a river fifty years the way I been without getting like it."

The boat swung past an overalled farmer driving

MISSISSIPPI

a herd of grunting pigs. The pilot yawned cavernously. "Getting late, ain't it, captain?" he asked. "I'd say it was pretty near ten o'clock judging by them pigs' shadows."

The captain consulted his watch once more. "Missed her three minutes, Buttereye," he announced. "Getting sleepy, ain't you?" He studied the vermilion Niagara Falls temporarily showing in the hole at the base of the dial. "It's a pleasure to tell the time when you got a watch like this. It's a natural pleasure."

"Them Swedes sure is smart the way they makes all them fancy watches," Buttereye asserted.

"That ain't no lie. There was a watch made by a Swede fellow at the exposition played a couple of notes every quarter of an hour and at twelve o'clock a little eagle come out on it and played the Star Spangled Banner. I couldn't buy that because they was asking too much for it, but just the same getting this one with the natural wonders for me, and the wonders made by man for States, is the best money I ever spent." He restored the watch to his pocket. "Guess you'd better be taking the wheel, son, and let Buttereye get his nap."

The boy limped forward, and taking the steersman's post began guiding the vessel through a never

MISSISSIPPI

ending succession of muddy rocks and irragrant, crow-haunted corn fields.

The old man watched approvingly. Shaking the ashes from the top of his pipe, he resumed his cheerful puffing. The vessel chugged past an abandoned shanty-boat rotting in a gloomy cove. His face darkened. "It's them that's spoiling the river," he muttered. "Same as warts on the cheeks of a pretty woman. Warts, that's what they are, just warts. And you and me ain't goin' to rest until we've burned 'em off."



CHAPTER TWO

THEY kept sharp watch two days later as the vessel, returning from her brief voyage, neared the bay sheltering the shanty colony. Here three or four shantymen, gaunt, rawboned, were sitting in dilapidated rowboats, fishing for mussels in the shallow water. But no life was visible on the nearest banks, and the vessel passed without incident. A few hundred yards further a shabby factory building to which other gaunt shantymen were pushing wheelbarrows loaded with mussel-shells, showed round a clump of cottonwoods. Circling gracefully to the narrow landing before it, the vessel came to a halt.

With a strident creaking of pulleys the gangplank was lowered to the mud. The rousters scrambled to shore. Swarming about the boxes erected in a great

MISSISSIPPI

mountain near the river edge, they tossed them onto their shoulders and shuffled onto the boat, giggling explosively as from the cracks in their burdens occasional buttons dropped out and slipped down their shiny backs. States, who had been steering, limped below to the main-deck. Watching the negroes at their noisy labor a moment, he took out a pole and line and began to fish. He had been engaged in this fashion for a few minutes when there swaggered up to him the Morning Glory's single passenger, a shifty-eyed, hook-nosed youth with a flat derby tilted at an angle so arrogant as almost to insult the beholder.

"Want to have some fun, States?" he demanded, as he pulled up a flashy trouser leg and exposed to a staring farmer a garter to which was fixed the miniature photograph of a burlesque actress.

"Sure, Zep. What doing?"

"Come over here and I'll show you." He led the way to the stern, and parting the foliage which curtailed most of the bank, pointed to a girl who, unconscious of any observer, was sitting on a log sorting out some herbs pulled from the ground near by.

She was a small, delicately molded girl—almost a child—with the sad, patient face of a nun and frail hands worn and stained with toil. Her meek eyes

MISSISSIPPI

were too prominent from undernourishment; her flaxen hair, in itself beautiful, was coiled in a rigid knot tied with a bit of frayed shoe-string; her dress was of faded, angular calico patched in a myriad places with pieces of stocking; her feet were bare and scarred with briars. At her throat was a single luxury, a necklace made of a score of safety pins linked together and culminating in four similar pins of larger size hanging down as a pendant over her breast. At intervals as she worked she dipped her fingers into a piece of brown paper and put a pinch of snuff to her nostrils.

States gazed at her and turned to his companion in disappointment. "What's the fun?" he whispered. "Towhead Etty is all I can see."

The other twisted States so that he faced a wasp nest hanging from a bough near the girl's shoulders. "Guess you see now, don't you?" he demanded.

"Nope."

"You're mighty dumb today, States. Don't you see that wasp's nest there?"

"Yep, see that all right."

"Well, what about sticking your fishing pole in it and letting a wasp or two get out?"

States vigorously shook his head. "I ain't going to make no wasp sting a girl. Even if she is a shanty-boater."

MISSISSIPPI

"Nobody's talking about stinging her. Just funny to watch the way different people acts when there's wasps around, that's all. Girls specially is funny. Generally pulls up their skirts over their heads and flaps like a chicken gone crazy. Bet that Towhead 'll make you laugh more than Fatty Stevens dancing naked on a greasy barrel."

"I'd like to see the fun all right, but I don't want to go picking on a girl."

"What's got into you today, States? If it was any of them fellows up at the barber shop they'd be tickled to death to get the chance." He undid a button of his flashy, strangling-waisted coat and taking a cigar, chewed the end showily. "I'm beginning to believe you're scared to do it. Yep, just plain scared. . . . If you don't do it, you ain't a sport."

"I ain't scared to do nothing." He hesitated. "You sure they ain't going to sting her?"

"'Course they ain't. Never do when they come out a little hole one at a time. It's when they come out a big one, three or four together, and kind of bump into each other that they get mad."

"All right. If it ain't going to hurt her, I'll do it." He leaned far over the side of the ship and reaching the pole toward the nest, gingerly punched a hole in the pulpy surface. A wasp came darting out,

MISSISSIPPI

buzzed furiously at the stick a moment, then flew off into the distance.

"Didn't work," Zep grunted. "Better try her again."

Once more States rose high on his toes and thrust the pole forward. The point penetrated and he was preparing to withdraw it when a sudden swirl of the current caused the stern of the vessel to swing slightly from the land. The unexpected movement, though trivial, was enough to upset his perilous balance; he toppled and only by a quick catch at the rail saved himself from dropping into the water. The pole shot from his hand and tore a great hole in the fragile nest. A fiery swarm buzzed out the orifice, drifted indecisively an instant as though searching for the guilty one, then flung itself upon the girl and hid her pale face and forlorn clothing beneath a quivering yellow-striped cloak.

States blanched with horror. Desperately he ran down the gangplank to aid her. But as he dashed beyond the leafy curtain he saw that three shanty-men who had been trundling wheelbarrows near by had already reached her and were beating off the attackers with their woebegone garments. Nothing remained for him but to watch. Wretchedly he waited till the last insect was routed and the girl,

MISSISSIPPI

leaning on the arm of one of her rescuers, stumbled up the cinder path which led toward Shantytown; miserably, he wiped away the beads of perspiration glistening on his cheeks, and with head dropping onto his breast, trudged to his old place at the rail.

Zep, still standing there, was apoplectic with glee. "Didn't I tell you she'd flap?" he chortled. "Lordy! Lordy! Did you ever see such flapping?"

States turned on him stonily. "That's what they call skunk laughing, Zep," he muttered. "And it's right. That's what you and me are, just skunks. And I'm worse than you 'cause it was me that done it."

"What you talking about, States? Ain't no harm done. She ain't nothing but a shanty girl."

"Shanty girl's human, ain't she?"

"Not to some people's way of thinking. More like a crittur." He rocked with a burst of laughter again, checked himself as the boy's countenance grew sterner, and swaggered off to find a more appreciative companion.

The terrier scampered forward and began tugging at States' trousers. The boy reached down to caress the dog, and catching sight of his reflection in a bucket of water, quickly put his hand to his collar.

MISSISSIPPI

His dejection increased. He began to search for something on the deck, and unable to find it, pried with the fishing pole under the roots overhanging the water. Here likewise he discovered nothing. "It's gone, Shoo Fly," he murmured to the dog. "My rainbow necktie's gone. And there ain't another to be had nowhere. At the store when I bought it they told me it was the last. All the others ain't got more than four colors." Ruefully he felt the bare collar button. "It's sure a punishment for what I done to Towhead Etty. It's sure a punishment."

He limped above as the bell clanged a warning, and taking the wheel, swung the boat from the land. A moment later the old man entered. Filling his corn-cob pipe, he seated himself comfortably on a bench, and smoothed out a roll of paper he had been carrying which when flat proved to be a sheet of transfer pictures labeled "Travels in China." "Miss Hessie keeps the books at the button factory just give me these," he announced. "She was down in Perryville last week and seen them in a candy store window and knowed I was saving them. There's a lot of education in transfer pictures if you buy them right. . . . What's the matter, son? You're looking blue."

"I am blue, pappy." Briefly he told what had happened.

MISSISSIPPI

The old man listened patiently. "I'm sorry about it, son. 'Cause I don't like your picking on a woman even if it was just a accident and, besides, if any of them seen you doing it, it's going to make more fighting. But it's done and there ain't no use worrying about it." He cut from the sheet a gaily colored square, spit on it carefully and pasted it onto the back of his hand. "Too bad, ain't it, when the world's as pretty as it shows in these Chinee pictures it's made so that things in it is always fighting each other. A cat fights a dog, and a snake fights a lizard, and a shantyman fights a steamboater. I wish it was different. Wish a fellow could get along without it. But my pappy had to be battling with them all the time he was on the river, and I've had to act just the same way. People says it's changed on some of the rivers. Says there's places where the shanty-boaters is honest and lives according to the law. But I don't believe it. Ain't no honest shanty-boaters."

He pulled the paper from his wrist and admiringly studied the green and white pagoda revealed beneath. "Fine picture, ain't it, with all them Chinamen praying around it. It'd look might pretty on a watch. I seen a Chinaman once. When I was up at the Exposition in St. Louis. He was waiting on table in a restaurant. People was eating what he gave 'em too."

MISSISSIPPI

He moved over on the bench to make room for Buttereye, who had just shambled through the door, then went on with his discourse. "No, sir, ain't no honest shanty-boaters. When a fellow gets to thinking about it sometimes it looks like the river would get tired of having such trash on it and get rid of them itself without waiting for us or Beaver Slough folks. River don't like them any better than we do, and she can take care of herself if she wants to. Yes, sir, wouldn't surprise me a bit if she just rose up some day and shook them off her, the way a dog does a pack of fleas. She done it here in '84 and there's nothing to stop her from doing it again."

"You're a-talking like the river's a flesh-and-blood being," drawled the pilot as he wiped the front of his glass eye on his nose to give it luster. "River ain't got feelings. River can't do nothing a human can do."

"What can't it do?"

"Well . . . can't curse a loafing nigger right . . . or chew tobacco, can it?"

"Can't chew tobacco maybe, but it can drown the nigger, and anyway that don't prove it ain't got feelings." He bent his fingers so that the tightening of the cords on the back of his hand caused the pagoda to begin a gentle swaying. "I ain't so sure

MISSISSIPPI

there ain't a kind of person mixed up with it some way. 'Course I ain't so much of a believer in spirits or things like that, but there's plenty of things can't be explained out of no arithmetic book. Now take my nigger deck boss, Ham Hawk. He was telling me he got lost in Nigger Skull Swamp one night, and a big storm blowed up, and he kept wandering around till he come to a cave by the river bank, down near the old levee used to run around Big Muddy Bend. It was a big cave and kind of seemed to run below the river and might get flooded, besides having mighty big snakes; but it was storming so bad he got in and went along a little ways and sat down.

"He was just getting settled, kind of shivering in the darkness and listening to the rain dripping down like men drinking out of bottles, when all of a sudden the place got lit up by lightning, and he seen that instead of being outside the river, he had someway walked into it, and what he thought was the rain was the fishes sucking past him. He was looking around, trying to get used to the light and the water, when at the end of the cave a old man all dressed in willow branches and wearing a crown come in, with a couple of crabs big as sheep walking beside him, and sat down on a kind of throne made

MISSISSIPPI

of fish scales. And then all the fish begun swinging around him mighty polite and saluting and saying, 'Hope you're feeling pretty well, tonight, Mister Mississippi,' and a couple of turtles raised up on their hind feet and started dancing and playing tunes on a conch-shell. 'Course that nigger's crazy and he'd have drowned if he'd been in the water like he says. But he might have seen something."

"Ham Hawk ain't seen nothing," Buttereye grunted. "He got that there yarn out of a Greek book. Miss Goldie was telling me about it one time up at the schoolhouse. Fellow named Pluto or Brutus or something used to run the sea. But there wasn't nothing said about rivers."

The captain's mustaches arched in scorn. "That nigger can't read no Greek."



MISSISSIPPI

The vessel rounded Burning Elm Light and leaving the mouth of Granny Fork, chugged into the surging waste of water beyond.

The captain moved to the door. "I'm going to get ready for landing, son," he announced. "What's the matter? Ain't she steering right?"

The boy had turned from the wheel and was gazing over the stern at the foaming wake. "She's steering all right, but seems to me she's going pretty slow for full speed. I just been watching her round the turn. The engines ain't never been right since them shanty-boaters broke in and stripped off all that copper." Intently he listened to the dull pounding of the pistons. The cheerfulness which was returning to the freckled countenance vanished. Angrily he caught a curl of his tousled scarlet hair and



MISSISSIPPI

twisted it in his finger. "I'm sorry for what I done to that shanty girl. But I sure hope I get a chance to use my gun on one of them men. People that would do what they done to the Morning Glory just to get a couple of cents from a junkman are the same as murderers. What they done was the same as cutting her throat."

"Ain't no doubt about that, son," the old man assented. "And talking about guns, I'm thinking we sure better have them ready tomorrow morning when we're going by Shantytown. 'Cause if they seen what happened today we'll need them bad."

The following day and an entire week passed, however, without any signs of an attack. They were concluding the incident had gone unnoticed when late one afternoon, as they were swinging past the dreary wilderness of weeds and pungent rotting grass which a mile below Beaver Slough formed Nigger Skull Swamp, three quick shots rang out from the shore. Three bullets buried themselves in the white cornice of the pilot-house.

States, who was in his cabin poring over river charts, seized his rifle hanging on the wall and sped outside. He reached the rail in time to see a tall moth-eaten figure clad in sombrero and overalls darting from behind a tree. Whipping the rifle to

MISSISSIPPI

his shoulder, he fired. A low cry of pain followed the shrill whistle of the bullet over the water. The runner staggered, glanced swiftly toward the boat, and flung himself headlong into a clump of towering sunflowers.

"Got him!" States shouted in exultation as the old man came racing, gun in hand, from below. "Looked like that fellow they call Chicken Sam!"

The old man's eyebrows were angry horns again; the slant of his mustaches was grim. "You been a long time getting that lesson," he murmured. "But you got it now. Maybe it'll teach you. . . . Where'd you hit him, son?"

"In the arm, I think, the way he was acting!"

"Keep him from stealing chickens a few days, anyway, won't it?"

The tops of the sunflowers began to shake and continuing their movements showed in a wavy golden line where the shantyman was plunging off into the swamp. But neither made any attempt to check the escape with a second shot.

The old man watched the brilliant swaying blossoms melt into the desolate landscape; then reached down and took off his belt whose buckle in the form of a gilded turkey proclaimed that in three successive contests he had won the gobbler-shooting champion-

MISSISSIPPI

ship of Beaver County. He pressed it into the boy's hand. "Looks to me like you ought to have this instead of me," he said gruffly.

The boy's face became ecstatic. "Gosh, you oughn't give me that, pappy," he murmured. "Gosh, I didn't think you'd give anybody that." His fingers closed on it tightly. As the old man strode away to escape his thanks, he slipped it about his pearl-studded waist and danced in boyish glee.

The terrier, which had come bursting up at the sound of the firing, eyed his young master wonderingly. States posed for an inspection. "What you think of me now, Shoo Fly?" he demanded. "That gold's just what I been needing with that mother of pearl, ain't it?"

On inspecting the leather he found it dry, and deciding to oil it, set to work as the boat tied up at the wharf. He was busily engaged at the task when three bow-legged piccaninnies holding up sunflowers like parasols paraded past, and reminding him of the others he had been watching so closely a little while before, caused him to glance off toward the scene of his triumph. At once his vigorous plying of the rag ceased. He arose, and shielding his eyes with his hand, stared intently at the horizon. A great buzzard was flying over the swamp, now descending until it almost touched the dismal vegetation shroud-

MISSISSIPPI

ing the earth, now rising in a low, melancholy circle.

States' forehead wrinkled thoughtfully. "I don't like that, Shoo Fly," he murmured.

He took up the rag and recommenced his work. But his ardor had vanished, and his gaze was constantly fixed on the dreary wheeling bird.

Another buzzard floated from out the wooded distance, then another. Both mewed eerily over him and glided on to join the first.

"Mighty bad luck to see three buzzards, Shoo Fly," he muttered. "They're the death sisters flying together, folks says. It means death's coming to three." A drop of oil splashed from the rag onto his shoe. He shivered as though it had been blood. "Must have shot him worse than I figured. Must have shot him bad."

His glance drifted from the buzzards to a tiny lizard, with a back evidently crushed under the hoof of a horse or cow, crawling feebly up the shore. Gravely he watched while at each blade of grass in its tortured course it halted to fight off half a dozen black ants seeking to drag it to the mouth of a near-by anthill; pityingly he limped to the land and placing it on a rock high about its tormentors, sprinkled its broken body with trickles of water he brought from the stream.

MISSISSIPPI

The minute creature revived a little, blinked its filmy eyes and brushed its head against the succoring fingers as though in gratitude, then stretched out rigid in death. A moment later the ants began to scale the stone. States shivered again and turned off to the swamp. "I'm going after him, Shoo Fly," he said.

The swamp was formed in part by the great horseshoe in the river known on the charts as Big Muddy Bend, and though overland the spot where the shooting had taken place was only half a mile away, he decided the longer route following the river would be surer. Up to the top of the Beaver Slough levee he climbed, limped quickly along the crest for a few hundred feet, then left it and began to follow the ridge of the crumbling levee around Big Muddy—a levee which years before had helped protect the neighboring settlements, but had long since been abandoned for a newer dike system, and now served only to protect the swamp.

Walking as quickly as his steel-barred leg would permit, he soon reached the first of the breaks in the levee which had made its lower reaches useless, crossed it, then at the foot of a second break sighted the patch which had sheltered the fugitive. He knew by the flight of the buzzards that the wounded man

MISSISSIPPI

was no longer there, but scrambling down, found a few stalks tinged with red, and with the dog ahead, limped through the levee break and into the swamp along a trail marked continuously by broken weeds or the crushed leaves of water-lilies.

Through mud that sucked hungrily at his shins and knees, through countless bayous where swarms of fierce mosquitoes rose with each splashing foot-step, through clumps of purplish thistles that tore wickedly at his vivid clothing he waded and stumbled, always nearer and nearer to the grisly circling birds. He reached one of the low cypress-crowned ridges which occasionally broke the flat desolation, climbed it, and with the buzzards now directly overhead, began trudging through the somber trees. He had advanced only a few yards when he saw a brown-clad body sprawled out grotesquely on a bed of moss.

Immediately the dog came to a halt and pointed. The boy spoke a word of encouragement to him and hastened on. At first glance he thought his journey had been useless, for a field-mouse was scampering unmolested over the ragged coat, pulling crumbs of bread out the grimy pockets. But as he bent over for a closer inspection he saw that blood was still flowing from a long hole torn in the side beneath the

MISSISSIPPI

arm-pit. Quickly he pulled up a few handfuls of muddy moss and tearing open the shirt, plastered the sticky mass over the wound, then binding it fast with a flexible vine, went down the ridge to get water.

He returned with a capful and dashed its murky contents into the other's face, a strange, tapering face reminiscent of a chicken, with beaklike nose, beady eyes and a towering comb of red hair. He had completed this task when he noticed that the wound was bleeding afresh, and stooped to pull the vine tighter. As he did so the lanky, lifeless legs gave a slight jerk. A subdued moan issued from the thin, taut lips. The glassy eyes turned in their stiff sockets and surveyed him dully. "What you . . . what you doing to me?" he muttered.

"Trying to stop your bleeding. You're shot. Shot bad."

Dreamily the shantyman put his hand to his injured side, then slowly brought the stained fingers near his face. "Wet, ain't they? Guess I am shot." The hand began a drowsy investigation of the mossy bandage. "Who are you, pardner? Can't kind of see somehow. My eyes is like . . . like as if butterflies was hopping around in them . . . butterflies with black spots. . . . Anyway . . . who are you?"

MISSISSIPPI

The boy hesitated. "States Lilly. . . ."

"Who'd you say?"

"States Lilly. . . . Was me . . . that shot you."

The shanty-boater raised himself on one arm and stared incredulously, then dropped feebly to the ground again. "'Tis you all right." His mouth twisted in a curious smile. "That's kind of funny. That's mighty funny. . . . What you going to do with me?"

"Take you up to Beaver Slough and get your hurts tended. Ain't going to leave a man to die in this swamp."

"Don't want to go to them Beaver Slough doctors." The reply came with an emphasis which showed his vigor was returning. "Them doctors don't treat a shantyman right."

"Where you want to go then?"

"Doc Claymore."

"He ain't a doctor."

"'Course he's a doctor. Worked at being a nurse in the jail hospital all the three years he was in the penitentiary. If that don't make a fellow a doctor, I don't know."

"He ain't a doctor. But I'll take a sick man where he wants to go. Up at Shanty Bend with the rest, ain't he?"

MISSISSIPPI

"Yep. . . . My boat's hid down by the river. You can row with that." He motioned that he wished to sit up and stoically let himself be propped against a tree. "Guess you can't carry me that far, can you? You're crippled."

"I'll get you there all right. Piloting makes your arm strong. . . . Ready to go now?"

"Yep."

States stooped and lifting the other onto his shoulders started through the cypresses, the shanty-man's great dangling feet flapping like a scarecrow's against his breast, the chicken-like head and gaunt arms bouncing against his back at each unevenness in the path.

They had proceeded only a few feet in this fashion when the wounded man dug his thumb sharply into his porter's side. "Don't you go off without that there sombrero," he grumbled. "Traded it from a nigger for a couple of hairs I pulled from a Gipsy. Don't get a chance like that with a Gipsy every day." He took the hat which the boy reached up to him, then exhausted by his speeches, closed his eyes once more.

States stumbled down the ridge and into the swamp. Half-way across the morass he came to a patch of wild onions, and depositing his burden on the reeking ground, sat down on a log to rest.

MISSISSIPPI

The shantyman's eyes reopened. With the sombrero he struck at an ugly blood-sucking fly flashing around his face. Then he chuckled faintly. "Sure is funny your carrying me and taking care of me," he murmured. "Sure is funny."

States tore up another handful of earth and moss to make a new tampon. "It's wrong for me to be doing it. Mighty wrong. But I ain't got the heart not to."

"It ain't wrong. It's just what you ought to be doing. That's why it's funny."

States stopped his labor in perplexity. "What you meaning?"

"Just what I'm saying. You oughtn't be fighting against me. You ought to be helping me. You and me's cousins."

The boy shrugged his shoulders, then placidly continued matting the clay and green fibers. "You're talking crazy, Chicken Sam. But I ain't paying no attention. 'Cause I know when people bleeds the way you been doing it makes their heads mighty queer."

"My head ain't queer, and I ain't talking crazy. I'm telling you the truth. You and me's cousins. More than that you're kinfolk with most everybody up at Shanty Bend. Oh, I know you think your

MISSISSIPPI

name's Lilly. But it ain't. It's Etty, and you're a shanty-boater, just the same as me."

"I ain't paying no attention to you."

The shantyman coughed silently into the torn sock which served as his handkerchief. "All right, ask any of the folks in Beaver Slough if it ain't so. Everybody in Beaver Slough knows it, everybody in Beaver County knows it. Except you. You ain't Captain Lilly's boy. He's done made a fool of you, same as he does everybody with his trick dog and his pulling the glass eye out of his pilot and all the rest of his smart-aleckness. He done it for a joke on us shanty-boat people. Played it right, too, raising you up to hate and fight your own people. I can see him laughing over it, the same kind of laughing that loony nigger killed his mammy was doing when they hanged him down at Perryville. But after to-day kind of looks to me it's turned against him. . . . Gimme a chew of tobacco."

"I'll give you the tobacco, but you keep on talking that way I'm going to get mad at you, even if you are hurt."

The shantyman cut off a ponderous chunk and filled his cheek. "You was just a baby when it was done. That's how you don't know nothing about it. I tell you it caused a mighty lot of excitement around

MISSISSIPPI

here for a while. Some people said he done it 'cause he was crazy over losing his own baby and some of them said he was your real pappy after all, but they was wrong. He did it account of hate for us shanty-folks. I ain't saying I'd have blamed him if what happened had been done on purpose. But it wasn't done on purpose. It was a accident. . . . Bet this tobacco come from Newt Pillow's grocery. Makes your mouth feel like there's grasshoppers in it."

He chewed peacefully a moment, then went on. "Come about when the Morning Glory was passing one day a couple of weeks before you was born. Was going by mighty fast, not caring how she was shaking up the shanties, the way she always does, and being as your mammy was ailing anyway, the rocking made her feel particular bad, so your pappy—Catfish they called him—fired a shot through the pilot-house to make her slow down. Well, just happened captain's little boy was up there, and the shot killed him. Catfish was mighty sorry when he found out what he'd done—leastways I reckon he was sorry—but he knowed people 'd think he did it on purpose, so he had to get out of the state before the sheriffs come for him. Got killed in a fight down the river about half a year after, we heard. That way when you was born you didn't have no pappy

MISSISSIPPI

around, and a couple of hours later you didn't have no mammy neither, because she died a-bearing you."

The boy's lips tightened with anger. A thin line of white showed beneath each of his eyes. "Can't stop your lying even when you're pretty near dying, can you? Everybody knows you're the biggest liar in Beaver County. You're just trying to stir up trouble between me and my pappy. Can't figure out what, but there's some trick behind it, same way as you done with Miss Goldie's nigger boy when you made it look like it was him stole her guinea rooster instead of you."

"There ain't no trick to this. There's a lot more to it after your mammy died, but I ain't got the strength to tell you. First some of them fancy ladies gives us them toothbrushes and Bibles and jaw-breaking candy Christmas-time seen you and began talking about how a innocent orphan oughtn't be allowed to grow up with such low-down people as us, and then a new preacher come along, and there was a revival, and seems how at the revival Captain Lilly stood up and said he'd adopt you. Next thing we knowed he was asking Judge Ash for the law papers. 'Course we asked the judge not to let him, because we seen what he was up to, but it didn't do no good. Them city people never gives a shantyman a chance."

MISSISSIPPI

The whitish line beneath the boy's eyes widened into a chalky triangle and spread slowly over his high cheek-bones. "If you wasn't sick I'd do something to you would make you mighty sorry for what you're saying. Pappy never hurt a fly. And raising a boy to hate his own people the way you're telling would be worse than Judas done . . . worse than selling the Lord. . . . I ought to leave you laying in the swamp."

Somberly he substituted the fresh tampon for the old, and lifting the wounded man to his former position, started anew his course toward the river. Round a greenish pool along whose edges myriads of water moccasins slid slimily he plodded, through a tangle of elderberry bushes on whose lacerated leaves swarms of locusts shrilled piercingly, then slackened his pace as he felt the shantyman's thumb once more digging into his spine. "What you wanting?" he demanded.

"You don't believe what I told you, do you?"

"'Course I don't believe it."

"Well, supposing Pres Caps or somebody in town told you. Would you believe it then?" His voice quavered with each unevenness in the boy's staggering progress.

"Pres ain't going to tell me something that ain't so."

MISSISSIPPI

"Well, next time you see him, you just ask him if you and me ain't kinfolk. Ask him if you ain't kinfolk with pretty near everybody in Shantytown like I told you. All the shanty people always marries kinfolk. That way they don't take no chances on getting bad blood."

"I ain't got no need to ask nobody nothing."

The other was silent a moment. "All right. You don't have to ask nobody. Just stand in front of a looking-glass and see if you look like Captain Lilly. You ain't got hair like his, you ain't got eyes like his, you ain't got nothing that's the same. . . . What you saying to that?"

There was no answer.

"What you saying to that?"

"There's plenty of boys don't look nothing like their pappies. . . . Don't you talk to me no more."

"You're the stubbornest person I ever seen. . . . Won't listen to the best kind of arguing. . . . Fix up that pad again, will you? There's a thorn or something got stuck it in and it's hurting bad."

The boy removed a fragment of twig which was causing the irritation and continued on in silence. Arriving at the river, he found the other's boat hidden in a thicket of sleepy pussy-willows, and began to row up-stream. It was dark when he

MISSISSIPPI

reached Shanty Bend, but guided by his passenger he brought the vessel to a halt at a rickety hut somewhat isolated from the others, and clambering out, seated the wounded man on a cracked sewer pipe set up as a bench before the door. He knocked loudly on the moldering boards, then as a clatter of heavy shod feet followed within, mumbled a good-by, and limped off into the darkness. Along the ghostly, candle-flickering line of shanties he trudged, over the humid dump behind the button factory, then saw the clanking weather-vane on the roof of Judge Ash's house and the lights of Beaver Slough.

Fumbling in his trousers, he took out a pocket mirror and by the feeble glow of the street lamp overhead studied his hazy reflection in the glass.

"Biggest liar I ever seen," he muttered.



CHAPTER THREE

IN the days immediately following, the shanty-man's words kept recurring and impressed themselves deeper and deeper into States' consciousness. He fought the idea first with indignation, then with ridicule; nevertheless, often he found himself taking out his mirror again or stopping beside some willow-shadowed pool on the shore to study his freckled reflection and mentally compare it with the wrinkled visage of the old man.

At last, after almost a week had passed and Sunday had arrived with no sailing scheduled until late in the evening, he decided that he would take advantage of the holiday to visit the barber, who had been his friend since childhood, by a brief conversation dispel all his foolish doubts, and spend the remainder of the afternoon hunting for reeds to form the pipes of a home-made calliope which he planned to present the captain at Christmas time.

MISSISSIPPI

Accordingly he told the old man he might not return until late, climbed the levee, and after a short walk, came to a halt before a clapboarded building where within he could see Mr. Capps lazily making some repairs. He waved his hand in salute as the other saw him, paused a moment to glance at the freshly painted barber-pole and the newly lettered sign, declaring that owing to complaints the Beaver Slough Tonsorial Parlors would no longer bob ladies' hair unless the customer was accompanied by husband or father, and kicking at a discarded piece of window rope looping out from a trash box in the vestibule, limped through the half-open door.

When he emerged, a full two hours later, the stripes on the pole seemed to be great red and white ribbons whirling about him in dizzy, blinding circles; one ribbon, grayish rather than white or red seemed suddenly to separate itself from the others and lashing round his feet, try to hurl him to the earth. Across the vestibule he staggered, with the tangling band gripping fiercer and fiercer at his ankles, over the bricked sidewalk, then neared the shallow gutter separating it from the road and fell headlong. Rigidly he lay there an instant, while Zep Wethers in front of the drugstore half a block away shouted gleeful approval, then numbly arose,

MISSISSIPPI

pulled off the piece of window rope twisted about his shoes, and stumbled blindly down the powdery highway. A stranger drove by in a high yellow-wheeled cart and called out to ask if he wished to ride. The boy neither heard the invitation nor perceived its maker. Only he saw two great yellow moons spinning giddily in a smoky, dancing cloud.

He reached the woods beyond the village, and as a fevered beast seeks a stream, plunged into its fragrant coolness. Mile after mile he coursed among the trees, still blind, still reeling, bursting now through a glassy web where a huge green and red spider sat menacingly blocking his path, now recoiling torpidly from a cattle fence whose keen metal barbs deeply cut his clothes and flesh. He began to grow calmer. Stopping at a spring he drank greedily, and wetting his handkerchief, swept it again and again over his burning face. With the return of sensation to his body, he realized that his broken tooth was aching agonizingly. Taking a piece of chewing gum from his pocket, he kept it in his mouth until it was a sticky ball, then carefully plastered it over the fractured, throbbing edge. Once more he stooped to drink feverishly of the cooling water, then arose and resumed his wandering through the forest, the whirling torture in his brain

MISSISSIPPI

now given way to a gloomy daze as he pondered and decided.

Night fell. Hypnotically he left the muttering wood and retraced his steps to the town; mechanically he drifted to the wharf and from behind a mound of crated stoves gazed at the Morning Glory gently swaying at her anchor, in the dazzling moonlight, her sooty, towering stacks upraised like giant negroes poling an ivory gondola over an opal sea. A rouser, with two coffee sacks tied around his body and turban and shoes made of great bundles of the same material, lay on the boiler deck strumming a guitar and chanting a mournful, drowsy blues. At the stern of the deck above, the captain was sitting, talking with a shadowy visitor he recognized as Dr. Boaz, the Beaver Slough dentist. For some time he stood there, watching, listening, then packed the gum tighter about his tooth as a new tremor of the nerve stung him into action, and stepped onto the gangplank. Quietly he climbed the stairs and limped down the corridor to his cabin; somberly he stared out its narrow window at the old man sitting at the stairway a few feet distant, cutting at a thick cork and chatting amiably with his guest. By the light of the dazzling carbide lamp above them, which whitely disclosed every detail of their

MISSISSIPPI

figures—even the faded remnants of a transferred Eskimo on the old man's wrist—he found a large purple bandanna. Spreading it upon the bed, he began packing upon it some vivid socks, and a few toilet articles he took from the top of a bureau.

He tugged at the half-closed drawer beneath to reach his shirts. It resisted a moment, then jerked free with explosive violence. A hail from outside instantly followed. "That you, States?" the old man's voice demanded.

"Um-huh." He stopped his work to look dully through the window at the questioner.

"Mighty glad you're back. Come out soon as you can. Me and Doc's wanting some harmonica music. Moonlight night like this is the best time there is for 'Cripple Creek.' "

The dentist, a fattish little man whose mouth was a golden monument to his profession, turned likewise to the dark interior. "Cap's got it right, States," he called.

From the deck below came the voice of a second rouser joining the other at the sleepy guitar, a voice rich, vibrant with lamentation. Over the water floated the refrain: "Good mornin', judge, how do you do? I've come for a little talk with you."

The music ceased for a moment. A donkey atop

MISSISSIPPI

the levee brayed deafeningly; Shoo Fly somewhere on a coal barge lying beside the vessel began to howl the quavering canine salute to the moon.

"Looks like everything's singing tonight," the old man chuckled, as the boy saw him reach over and take from a chair near him a second cork, hollow for two-thirds its length and barred with pins. "Even the flies I got in this cage are buzzing till you'd think they was going to blow up or something." He lifted the cage to his ear. "Too bad a fellow ain't got the time to go around collecting ones that buzzes different notes, ain't it? Bet if a fellow worked at it for a while he could fix up some way of tickling them with a straw or something and get enough to play a piece."

Reflectively the dentist pulled at one of the shabby sideburns hanging down like tails from his puffy cheeks. "Yep. Looks to me like that'd be a pretty good idea. Might be a barrel of money in it. Fellow can't never tell. What you going to do with them cages, anyway? Teaching Shoo Fly a new trick or something?"

"Nope. It's a bet I got with Buttereye. We was talking this morning about the cannibals them exploring fellows is telling in the papers they seen in Africa, and I says flies is cannibals, the same way.

MISSISSIPPI

He says they ain't, so I'm going to prove it to him."

The dentist took a mirror from his pocket and with a pair of small surgical scissors began trimming the sideburns' frayed edges. "Well, looks to me like you ought to win. But then, when you get to figuring, maybe again you oughtn't. 'Course a fly ain't got teeth like a human, but that don't keep him from eating, does it? How many you got in there?"

"Just sixteen right now. Ain't a big cork you see. Come out of a ketchup bottle. But I guess sixteen ain't so bad for one day, especially when you figure five of them's different kinds."

"Looks to me being different's what ought to count. That new cork you're cutting is a jug cork, ain't it?"

"Um-huh. I'm counting I ought to get thirty in it anyways. . . . Lean over and listen to this fellow with the green and blue stripes on his belly a-buzzing. Ain't he a beauty? The way I'm figuring now, he's the one that's going to do the winning for me."

"Where'd you get him?"

"Sheriff give it to me. I was telling him about the bet when he was on the boat this afternoon, and he caught it up at the jail for me during supper-time. Sent it down by one of the niggers. Lordy,

MISSISSIPPI

he's mad, ain't he? If he ain't a cannibal, I ain't never eat meat. . . . Think I'll put them pins in closer together. Wouldn't want him to get away. . . . Ain't you coming out, States?"

The words brought the boy starting guiltily from the gloomy torpor into which he had fallen. "I ain't ready yet," he muttered, and taking from the bureau a shirt patterned in green and red diamonds interspersed with occasional yellow horseshoes, began carefully enveloping it in newspaper.

"Guess he's washing up," he heard the captain remark, and continuing his wrapping during the wandering sentences that followed, put down the paper again to listen with straining ears as the dentist said casually:

"Ain't heard no bad news about Pres Capps, have you, capt'n?"

"Nope. There ain't none, is there?"

"Nothing as I know of. That's why I was asking. This hair clipping I'm doing reminded me. I seen him this afternoon going over to take a wart off that dudeified city fellow that's staying at Judge Stubbs, and he was looking all broke up."

"Maybe that girl he's been going with up in Granny Run throwed him over. He was telling me she's been getting too stuckup to live. Bought her

MISSISSIPPI

the prettiest hat they had down in Pine City—picked it out himself—with five little mirrors on it about the same size as the one you're using and some strawberries pretty enough to make your mouth water, and she give it to her little sister to cut up and use the mirrors for fixing a dolls' house. Can't beat that, can you?"

"Can't never beat a woman. Guess it was her, because he was sure looking bad. . . . Gosh, I was clean forgetting I got to go up to Mace Lowry's. He wants me to put in three gold fillings for him, and pull out two teeth from his wife he says ain't worth filling, and take that new calf of his in trade for it, but I ain't going to do it till I see the calf. . . . Afraid I ain't going to hear States playing."

He brushed the clipped hairs off the shoulders of his coat and bustled out of sight. The captain bent over the buzzing cage and loosening the pins, one by one began reducing the apertures between. The boy moved away from the window once more and leadenly resumed his packing. In a little while it was completed. Wrapping the bandanna about the myriad articles piled upon it, he knotted it tightly, and taking it in his hand, slowly opened the door.

The old man heard his step on the sill. "You been a mighty long time coming, son," he called. "Doc

MISSISSIPPI

had to go." He looked up and saw the boy's figure dully outlined against the blackness of the doorway. His snowy brows upraised in bewilderment. "What on earth's come over you, son? You been fighting a wildcat or something, getting your clothes torn up that way? And your face is as white as if leeches has been on you." His wonder became touched with anxiety. "You ain't hurt, are you?"

A sock slipped out an imperfectly tied corner of the handkerchief and dropped to the floor. Rigidly the boy stooped and picked it up. "I ain't hurt . . . the way you mean."

"I'm mighty glad to hear it. I was scared for a minute. . . . Where you going with that bundle?"

"I'm going . . . away."

The old man pulled his chair nearer. "What you saying? I must be getting deaf or something."

"I'm going away."

The crescent mustaches, now uplifted like the brows, gave a jerk of alarm; the withered hand holding the cage trembled. "You're talking foolish, son. Where you going?"

"I'm going to get off the boat."

"You going daft or something? . . . I believe you are hurt. Your hand looks like it's bleeding."

"I ain't hurt and I ain't going daft. . . . I found out what you done to me."

MISSISSIPPI

A convulsive quiver shot through the old man's body. His mustache and his brows drooped like rotten threads; his wrinkles deepened until they appeared like great wounds cut by a sword in the head of a wax dummy. With the cage still clutched in his hand he arose and took a groping step forward, stood an instant while his shrunken lips moved soundlessly, piteously, then staggered and crumpled into his chair. For several minutes he remained thus, a gray broken scarecrow toppled from its pole, his only sign of life the slight jerking of the Eskimo on his wrist as it followed each faint beat of his pulse. Then he sat up dazedly.

The chanting of the negroes below had changed to a tense, monotonous grunting, the strumming of the guitar had become the muffled, rhythmic rattle of dice. The old man turned his head as though listening, then aimlessly, lifelessly, brushed at a white moth flown down from the light and circling about his snowy beard. "Who . . . told you?"

"Chicken Sam . . . The day I shot him."

"You ain't . . . going to believe . . . what a lying fellow like him says . . . are you?" His dull voice was tinged with forlorn hope.

"I didn't believe him. And I asked Pres Capps. He said it wasn't so at first. But I seen by his face he was lying. And then he told me it was true."

MISSISSIPPI

"What you going to do?"

"Going back to my own people."

The old man's hand waving before his face stiffened; the nails of his clenching fingers dug deep into the cork. The blurred Eskimo on his wrist throbbed as though the flesh beneath would burst. "I'll kill you if you go . . . kill you with my own hands."

"Rather be killed than go on living with a man cruel-hearted as you." The sock dropped out the handkerchief to the floor again, dragging with it a battered tooth-brush and a celluloid soap-dish. Bitterly he restored them to the bundle. The mournful whistle of a far-off steamboat sounded down the river. His eyes filled with tears. Wretchedly he twisted the knot of the handkerchief tighter and took a step toward the stairway. "I'm going now. . . . In a minute you can start . . . your laughing. Guess you'll do a lot of laughing, won't you? Was a fine joke. Guess the best you ever played. Making a fool out a boy for sixteen years, bringing him up to despise his own people, shoot his own people. And all the good times you give him, and all the saying you liked his harmonica playing, and all the steamboating you taught him was just to make the joke better. All the while you was hating him . . . just waiting for him to do what he done to Chicken Sam."

MISSISSIPPI

The throbbing of the Eskimo on the captain's hand ended. The clenched fingers relaxed and began picking at the scars the long nails had cut in the top of the rubbery cage. A fragment crumbled off onto his knee; a fly squeezed into the minute hole created and buzzed excitedly out to freedom. He gave no heed. "I done you wrong. . . . But I wasn't hating you. I tell you now, and the angels that writes things down will tell you when you die. I wasn't hating you. . . . I was . . . loving you."

States moved closer to the stairs. "The angels got it wrote down right. . . . What you done was worse than Judas done . . . worse than selling Jesus."

Pathetically the captain moved his chair so that it blocked the narrow exit, entreatingly he reached out and clutched the other's arm. "Don't you go away and leave me, son. I ain't going to let you go. I'm a old man. Ain't got nothing in the world except you and the Morning Glory. And when I see you limping off that way, knowing you ain't never coming back, it's like . . . like one of them bottles of burning acid up at the drugstore has got into my heart and broke."

"You raised me up to despise my own people. Shoot my own people. . . . Them flies is getting away on you."

MISSISSIPPI

Dully, automatically, the old man turned the cage and pressed a finger over the hole. "They ain't told you why I raised you up. Maybe they told you something, but nobody can tell you right excepting me and the angels does the writing. I might have knowed you'd find out some day, now you're growing up. You had to find out. But I figured the way you was on the boat pretty near every minute with just me and Buttereye, never playing with the Beaver Slough children, and hardly ever going to town when I wasn't along, you'd be kept from knowing. I figured the people that was my friends wouldn't tell you 'cause they wouldn't want to hurt you, and any that wasn't my friends wouldn't tell you either 'cause they'd be scared. I know I done you wrong. I done you terrible wrong. But let me tell you why I done it. Then maybe you'll kind of understand and not want . . . to go away."

"I'll listen. . . . But it ain't going to do no good."

The finger slipped away again and resumed its fitful plucking. "Don't know why things come about the way they done. Many a night I've laid awake trying to figure it, just hunting back into my life seeing whether there was something wicked I done that I was being punished for, or maybe something my pappy done. But I couldn't get no satisfaction.

MISSISSIPPI

Maybe trouble wouldn't have come on me if I hadn't waited so long before I got married. Everybody said there'd be nothing but bad luck come from a old man marrying a young girl like I done. Or maybe things would have been different if a bat hadn't flown into the church just as we was walking up the aisle. A fellow can't tell." He paused an instant to draw a deep, painful breath. "I ain't hardly spoke to you about my wife. I ain't hardly spoke to anybody. Niota, her name was—her pappy got it out of a songbook, he told me—and he done right, because nothing but a songbook could have named her right, she was so sweet and pretty. Three years we was married and getting along just as happy as we could be, never missing a social or a candy-pull anywhere in the valley, going to the Busy Bee and getting cream rolls pretty near every time we was in Pine City, and getting our pictures taken sitting driving an automobile or standing in front of the White House in Washington or the other ways they has them photograph booths down there fixed up. Just everything a couple of people could figure out, we done. And we was beginning to think all the bad-luck talking and the bat was going to be wrong, when she had a baby . . . and a couple of weeks after . . . she died." He paused

MISSISSIPPI

again and putting the cage upon the rail, rubbed his hand across his moist eyes.

The boy shifted uneasily and turned away. "Another of them flies . . . is getting away on you."

The old man went on as though he had not heard. "They brought a couple of hacks from Granny Run for the funeral. And I planted some bleeding-hearts by her grave, and all the love I had in me for her I give to the baby that was left. States was his name. She give it to him. Cutest little fellow I ever seen, and even when it was only a few weeks old it was doing little things just the way she done, always having two little dimples in his chin when he was doing his funny talking, just like her, and every time he seen me coming with his bottle kind of laughing and putting his hands over his eyes like Niota done when I brought her a box of candy. Almost all the time, so I could be near him, I kept him up in the pilot-house, swinging in one of them baskets they sends back on wires when you get packages wrapped up at the Mammoth Department Store in Pine City. Was always figuring how one of them baskets would make a mighty nice cradle and when I bought it, I seen I was right. He was laying in it one morning as we was passing Shanty-town, gurgling to himself and pulling at the daisies

MISSISSIPPI

I had stuck in around him the way he always done, when your pappy, Catfish Etty, and his brother they called Cottonmouth come out with guns, and your pappy hollered to me to slow down. They used their guns quicker them days than they do now, and we'd been having a lot of trouble with them. Guess we was going pretty fast, but we couldn't go any slower because we was taking some chairs and things for a big burgoo and political meeting they was going to give for the governor up Granny Fork, and we had to get them there quick as we could. Anyway a shantyman ain't got no right to tell a river captain how to run his boat. And when Catfish figured we wasn't throttling her, he took up his rifle and shot. I seen one of the daisies kind of shiver and I run over to the basket. And when I got there I seen he was dead. . . . Shot right through his little side.

"I knowed the killing wasn't an accident. Catfish Etty was as fine a shot as there was in the county. And when I looked at him laying there with daisy petals scattered all over him and the two little dimples still in his chin kind of fading away, I went raving crazy, I guess. 'Cause that baby wasn't just a baby to me. It was Niota. Don't know much what I done except I caught up my rifle and kept

MISSISSIPPI

Buttereye swinging the boat full speed round and round the shanties and just kept shooting and shooting at them till all my bullets was gone. And then I dropped to my knees and swore I'd never rest till I'd killed all I could and drove the rest off the river. A month went by, and I was still just like a lunatic, hardly eating or going to bed, and sometimes when I was getting a little rest, starting out of it and walking in my sleep up and down the deck, shooting at the owls hooting on shore till Buttereye would come down and stop me. Got so bad I could hardly get a nigger to work on the boat. Then one night I heard about your being born, and losing your mammy. And I fell to my knees again and thanked the Lord for making her die. And I prayed to him till I dropped to the floor from praying to raise you up to be a curse to your pappy and your kinfolk every day you lived.

"A couple of weeks later they was holding a big revival and some of the church ladies got roused up about a innocent baby like you being brought up in wickedness on the shanties, and they got the judge to take you away. And Miss Goldie's mother, that used to always get fainting spells when there was something like that going on, brought you to the meeting. The preacher had got through talking, and

MISSISSIPPI

a couple of girls from Hanging Dog was singing a hymn, when Miss Goldie's mother walks up to the altar and holding you up in her arms to all the people like she was going to baptize you, cried out asking who was going to adopt you and save you from a life of sin. And when I seen the little white dress they'd fixed you up in, pretty near the same as the one States used to wear, and seen how your poor little foot was all crippled, something inside my head went kind of funny, and I stood up in the aisle and said I would. I don't know what made me say it. Maybe the same kind of feeling of a lady I heard about down in Pine City whose baby died and she come back from the cemetery and stole another she seen sleeping in a baby buggy in front of the phonograph store. Maybe too, there was something in it about raising you up to hate and fight your own kinfolk and that way get revenge on them for what they done to me. I don't know. Anyway I took you and give you the name of States just like Niota done and set you in the little basket up in the pilot-house and put the daisies around you. Pretty soon word come your pappy was killed in a fight down the river, and I began to forget about getting even. 'Cause I was loving you . . . the same as my son that was dead."



*They tossed them onto their
shoulders and shuffled
onto the boat.*

MISSISSIPPI

The dog, which had come above as the old man was speaking and unnoticed pointed a fly escaping from the cage, was now nuzzling vigorously at his pockets for a reward. Feebly he drew out the bag of candy and counted five red drops into his palm. "That's all there is to tell you. . . . You still want to go away?"

The dog moved to States and began tugging at a shoe-lace dangling from his bundle. Gloomily the boy pulled it away. "I'm sorry about your wife and I'm sorry about your baby. But that don't change the wrong you done me. Even if you hadn't done it for a trick I'd be going. They're my own flesh and blood. You're doing a lot of talking now. But it's just because your joke's found out, because it's turning against you. You didn't say anything before. Just let me go on hating and cursing and trying to kill them that I ought to be helping and cherishing. You'd have been glad if I'd have shot my own pappy." He slung the bundle over his shoulder. "I'm waiting for you to move that chair."

The old man's mustaches upraised grimly, the Eskimo on his hand once more began a passionate throbbing. Tightly he gripped the arms of the chair as though to resist any attempt to wrest it away. "I ain't going to let you go. I'll kill you before I let

MISSISSIPPI

you go. You were born their flesh and blood. But you ain't theirs now. You're mine. It was me that nursed you all them days when your crippled leg got worse and they thought you was dying; it was me that went into the wharfboat to get you that time the cotton bales laying in it caught fire. I gave you a education the best I knowed how, I raised you up to be honest and good and law-abiding, to be the kind of boy Pres Capps and Miss Goldie and Judge Ash and all of them are mighty glad to speak to when they see you on the street, to be the kind of steamboater a river's mighty proud to have sailing on her. And I ain't going to see you become . . . river trash." The mustaches, the snowy brows stiffened into fierce spines of defiance as he saw the boy take a dogged step to move past him. Then his grimness suddenly collapsed into withered desolation. With quivering hand he moved from the stairway and feebly rose to his feet. "I'll get you . . . them two Indian blankets laying in my cabin. Don't make blankets like that nowadays. It's mighty cold on . . . the shanties . . . in winter."

"Don't want nothing from you. Wouldn't take the clothes I'm carrying or the watch you give me either if you hadn't told me I'd more than earned them piloting." States caught up the dog bounding

MISSISSIPPI

at the dangling lace, hugged him desperately an instant, then returned him to the deck, and ordering him back as he attempted to follow, limped down the stairs.

The old man slumped into his chair. Setting his elbows on the rail, he gazed with glassy eyes at the bent figure stumbling over the gangplank. Another fly sped out from the cage, then another. The dog pointed them with enthusiasm, then after a patient but vain wait for the customary reward, as before began nuzzling his master's pockets. Finding that even this vigorous measure failed of effect, after some moments of hesitation the terrier daringly took the edge of the candy bag in his teeth and jerking it to the deck, began a joyous feast. Still the old man gave no heed.

A door down the deck opened softly. The pilot, whose glum visage showed that he had seen and comprehended the boy's departure, came slowly forward and gently put his hand on the old man's shoulder. "It's time we was starting for Pine City, captain. That special packet they're sending down to New Orleans is starting about sunup, and we got to go right now if we want to get all this load on her."

The waxen head did not cease its glazed staring.

MISSISSIPPI

Only the lips moved in a numb gray line. "We ain't going yet, Buttereye. . . . He'll be coming back. . . . And when he comes we got to be waiting."

The pilot sat down on a box beside him and dejectedly began polishing his glass eye on the tail of his shirt. The tense grunts of the negroes on the deck below quickened. The musical chinking of many pieces of money striking in rapid succession against wood rose above the excited rattle of the dice. Suddenly the grunts became shrill, angry curses. There was the sound of a knife being pulled out of a scabbard, and a low, threatening command. Then the dice rattled out again, slowly now, regularly, like the pendulum of some lazy, far-off clock with the chinking money like faint bells marking the fractions between each beat.

A bent figure carrying a bundle appeared on the wharfboat and began trudging over the gangplank. The old man's head jerked upward. Swiftly he arose and peered down the stairway, his body trembling with eagerness, his face ecstatic. Rigidly, heavily, as though his limbs were impelled by a machine of which the steel frame about his leg was a part, the boy climbed the grooved steps and reached the top. "There's your turkey-shooting belt," he said, and

MISSISSIPPI

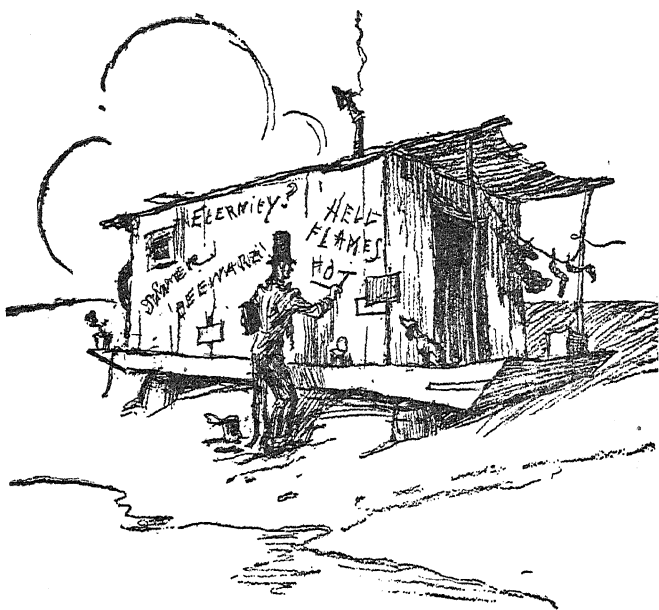
reaching it out to the captain, tramped back into the darkness.

The clatter of the stoking irons scraping at the furnaces drifted up from the boiler room. A cloud of milky ashes floated over the deck. The old man put down the bright-buckled leather swinging in his hands. "Ain't no more use waiting now, Buttereye," he said. His sleeve brushed against the fly cage and sent it rolling to the floor. With tears streaming down his cheeks he picked it up, and turning it pathetically in his fingers, gazed between the glistening bars. It was empty. "They've flowed away, Buttereye," he murmured. "The green and blue striped one and all of them have all flowed away. It's enough to make a fellow cry pretty near. Enough to make a fellow cry."

He stumbled forward and clanged the bell. The boy, sitting in a patch of weeds on the bank, heard it and shuddered; watched in a trance as the gang-plank creakily upraised and the vessel sailed like an ivory phantom down the moonlit willows. A thick cinder-starred column of smoke sweeping out from the flaming stacks swirled to the earth and enveloped him in an acrid, sooty veil; he breathed it gaspingly, hungrily, as a drowning man breathes the air which means his life. It lifted. Again he

MISSISSIPPI

watched until a group of towering pines near by blotted the white apparition from sight, then flung himself down at the river's edge and lay there writhing in agony. A great fiery cinder from the ebony curtain still swirling overhead dropped upon his wrist. Unheeded, it lay there smoking faintly and burned to blackness.



CHAPTER FOUR

ALL that night he lay there. The sun began faintly to touch the distant willows. He arose and washing his face in the cool water set out for Shanty Bend.

Around the edge of the town he limped to avoid the inhabitants already appearing in the streets, over the dump behind the button factory, then trudged down the cinder path stretching from it and, rounding a giant cottonwood, saw the shanties stretching bleakly along the water.

MISSISSIPPI

He had seen the rotting buildings countless times before and had often gazed with curiosity at their bizarre occupants; now he looked again and sucked at the burn on his wrist until it bled. Along the curve of the bay in a muddy, moldering crescent they lay, like derelicts the river had wearied of carrying and had cast disdainfully onto the shore. Here was one covered with great sections of brilliant-hued corrugated paper, peeled and faded by the weather until it resembled some uncouth animal trying to shed its diseased skin. Here was another clearly manifesting the outcast automobiles which had given it birth, its sides the battered running-boards and hoods, and two different-sized wheels its windows. Next it was the greenish hulk of an abandoned street-car, with part of a broken trolley-pole still showing above the domed roof. In front of him was a shanty made of rusty sheets of tin daubed with crudely painted signs demanding, "Where Will You Spend Eternity?" or in smaller letters, "Hell Flames Hotter Every Day. Kneel, Brother, Kneel and Pray."

He looked in vain, however, for the shanty with the great chicken coop at the stern which he knew had been Chicken Sam's home; and his heart sank as it struck him that the wounded shantyman like

MISSISSIPPI

so many others of his kind after trouble with the more aristocratic inhabitants of the valley, had perhaps taken in his mooring-lines during the night and drifted down the river, there to wait until his wounds had healed and the offense which had brought them on was forgotten. Up the tree he climbed, forlornly to wait and watch for some sign of the other's presence. But though he remained there three hours he saw or heard nothing. His limbs began to cramp, hunger began to assail him. Seeing a robin picking at some plums on a branch of the tree below him, he crawled down a few feet, reached out, and filling his pockets with the yellow fruit, began to eat.

A gloomy figure clad in a black hat and a funereal black coat, whom he recognized as Preaching Daniel, came out before the fiery-lettered shanty and began painting a new, doleful legend, while with each movement the long tails of his coat dipped in and out the can. A moment later, from the structure boarded with the peeling paper issued a figure he knew by its grotesque bulkiness to be Hunk-o'-Bread Andy, who in all weathers wore three suits of clothes, one over another, and stuffed out the myriad pockets with pieces of bread he begged in the town.

MISSISSIPPI

On the porch of a shanty whose pillars were made of tomato cans set one on top another and whose roof was tiled with the license plates of a myriad automobiles, a barefoot girl issued and sitting down beside a great heap of mussels began opening them with a long knife. It was Towhead Etty. The boy bit his lip in humiliation as he saw that rags were tied about her head and one of her feet as though she still suffered from the effects of the wasps. For half an hour he watched her at the oily labor. The striking of the clock in the far-off steeple of the Baptist Church roused him. "I'll ask her if he's gone," he muttered.

Descending from the tree, he limped over to the dwelling, and still munching a plum, halted before the door and knocked hesitantly on the tin. There was a patter of bare feet inside, then the door opened, and the girl appeared in the aperture, wiping her hands on a piece of coffee-sack. Her sad, gentle face, now doubly like that of a nun with the bandage over her forehead, blanched as she recognized the visitor; the necklace of safety-pins dangling on her breast rose and fell agitatedly with her frightened breathing. She took a quick step backward as though to retreat into the protection of the shadowy cabin, as she did so almost treading

MISSISSIPPI

upon a fat, spotted toad which had hopped pompously to the doorway beside her.

"What you wanting?" she asked dully.

Bitterly the boy watched her face move painfully beneath the bandage; gloomily he shifted the bundle in his hand and began pulling at a twig caught in the top. "I'm looking for Chicken Sam."

"Chicken Sam ain't here no more."

"Ain't he coming back?"

"I don't know. . . . What you wanting with him?"

The plum the boy was eating clung stickily to his fingers. He tossed it into the river. "I was going to ask him to let me live on his shanty. . . . I've come back to my own people."

The throbbing of the necklace on the girl's breast ceased. Her brown eyes rounded in wonderment. "You come . . . to live on a shanty-boat?"

"I found out what was done to me. . . . You know where I can go?"

She gazed at him thoughtfully and fingered one of the pieces of stocking which formed the patches of her dress. Then her lips curled in a smile that touched her face with the pale warmth of the faded, artificial roses in the wreath hanging at the window. "I'm glad you come. . . . I was scared at first."

MISSISSIPPI

He turned away guiltily, hesitated, and drew a handful of the crushed fruit from his pocket. "Maybe . . . you want some plums?"

"Um-huh. . . . I'll get Aunt Vergie."

She walked down the shore. Entering a dwelling where a gigantic red wagon umbrella showed before the door, she emerged in a moment with an old woman, and came hurrying back to the boy.

He had seen the newcomer before, but not as often as most of the others of the shanty colony, and as she approached he studied her curiously. She was a woman who had once been very tall, but now was so withered and bent with age that she seemed almost a dwarf. Her cheeks were a dusty-shadowed yellow, lined with a network of tiny wrinkles; two braids of snowy hair drooped out from the dilapidated sunbonnet she was wearing onto her stooped back. Her dress was a torn, once gaudy piece of cloth which had apparently been part of a bed comforter; with each step she took along the pebbly ground a piece of broomstick that took the place of her left leg flashed out beneath the fraying hem. Yet in spite of her fantastic appearance and the poverty evident in every line of her tattered garments and toil-worn hands, there were no traces of melancholy in her face. The clicking of the broomstick as she hobbled along with a heavy cane was

MISSISSIPPI

brisk, animated. Her gray eyes, peeping out from the depths of two whorls of withered skin, were bright with good humor. The lines cut deep about her mouth were constantly shifting in animation as she chatted with the girl beside her.

She reached the boy, and stood watching him hesitantly as one watches a superior being, then, as he put out his hand, shook it eagerly and kissed him on the cheek.

"You're a good boy, son," she said.

She moved off again and surveyed him delightedly. "Lord alive! Sure does me good to see you again. I ain't seen you right since the day you was a baby and the sheriff came and took you away. . . . Towhead says you're looking for a place to stay."

"Yesm'm."

"Well, guess that ain't going to be very hard to find. You can stay right here. Fact is, if you had gone over to Chicken Sam's the way Towhead was telling me I'd have come over to get you. My old man was your mammy's brother. Me and Towhead'll be mighty glad to have you. Come inside and get a snack to eat. You're looking mighty tired."

She took his arm to lead him forward and notic-

MISSISSIPPI

ing the steel braces below his knee, reached down and examined them curiously. "Guess you and me'd be mighty good friends even if we wasn't kinfolk, both being kind of troubled in the legs. This here one of mine that's gone has been getting mighty bad pains in it lately. That's what I was up seeing Nigger Sue about. The doctor down in Pine City that cut it off done buried it all twisted up, that's what's causing the trouble. If I knowed where it was laying I could dig it up and straighten it. Dog-gone that doctor. I told him to be mighty particular about the way he buried it. But I could see all the time he wasn't paying no attention. I been looking all over for him. But people say he ain't in Pine City no more."

She led the way inside and motioning the guest to a seat made of a vinegar barrel to which the top of a canvas chair had been nailed as a back, took out some potatoes roasting in a decrepit stove and heaped them into a rusty tin plate.

The boy put down the bundle on the floor and gloomily let his gaze drift round the desolate interior. The building was scarcely more than a shell of packing-box boards pierced with a single smoky window, and studded with numerous circles of light marking vanished knots in the crudely joined wood.

MISSISSIPPI

The boards themselves, however, were rarely visible, for, to keep out the river winds, the walls were everywhere covered with pictures cut from catalogues or newspapers and great biblical broadsides, large and glamorous as circus posters, all pasted indiscriminately together, so that in one corner a stern-bearded Moses with the law tablets upraised before him seemed delivering them into the hands of a champion prize-fighter clad only in a breech clout, while near by, a scarlet-helmeted Joshua, with arm outstretched to stop the sun, now appeared to be calling attention to the astounding hair of a great-eyed damsel who used a certain infallible restorer which was on sale at Capps' Tonsorial Parlors.

Elevated a little from the floor were two beds, one made of automobile cushions nailed together and covered with a few folded sugar-sacks, the other formed by a piece of ragged carpet stretched saggily between four sawed-off fence posts. Above them were two companion pictures in gilded frames—one, "The Burning of Rome," the other, "The Assassination of Julius Cæsar." On the wall opposite hung five shiny name-plates taken from the coffins of five long-dead members of the Etty family, strung together with pieces of faded ribbon and topped by a shabby cluster of immortelles. In a

MISSISSIPPI

corner was a rusty phonograph of the sort consisting chiefly of a horn and a giant spring. Above it was a battered cuckoo clock.

States ceased his inspection as the old woman set the potatoes and a chunk of greasy cornbread on the table and took a seat on a broken piano stool beside him. There she sat, chatting gaily while he forced himself to eat, then as he pushed the empty plate from him, took out a battered pocketbook and opening the clasp, exposed a score of cigar stubs of various sizes. She held it forward invitingly. "Want to smoke, son?"

He shook his head.

The old woman poked about the collection with her shriveled finger. "Lot of them, ain't there? But it's mighty hard to find the one you want. Looks to me cigars ain't what they used to be. I spent pretty near a whole afternoon picking these up in front of the courthouse down in Pine City 'cause I figured election time ain't so far off now and that's where the best ones would be. But they're all just trash. Ain't never got any like them three I picked up a couple of years ago when that congressman come up to Hanging Dog to dedicate the new school building. They ain't hardly half-smoked and got the prettiest gold bands on them you ever seen. But

MISSISSIPPI

I ain't smoking them every day. I'm saving them in this here little pocket for something that's special. . . . You sure you don't want to smoke, son?"

The boy shook his head again.

The old woman took a cheap bone holder from an outside fold of the pocketbook and surveyed it curiously. "Guess I'll try this here thing. Fellow that looked like a school-teacher or something seen me picking up the cigars and come over and give it to me. Said if I put the ends right in my mouth I'd get the miseries or something. Seems like there's people that just spends their lives looking for trouble. Always thinking up something new."

She set the stub in the holder and nodded toward a door at the back of the shanty where behind the sill showed a mound of dry mussel-shells. "That'll be your room, son," she said amiably. "Ain't much, but it's all we got. After you get rested a little more you and Towhead better go up to the Big Store and get yourself a bed."

He put down his fork and looked at her in bewilderment. "I don't know about no Big Store. Besides I ain't got no money."

The old woman chuckled. "You ain't never heard of the Big Store?"

MISSISSIPPI

"Nom'm. Heard of the Mammoth Store down at Pine City, of course. But not no Big Store near here."

"What they teach you on them steamboats? Thought everybody knowed about that. The Big Store's the dump. Get mighty fine things there sometimes, too. That's where pretty near everything in the shanty excepting them funeral plates come from."

She struck a match and was bringing it to the end of the cigar when her hand stopped short in mid-air. "Lordy, I'm a fool," she flashed. "If a boy's coming home to his own people ain't something special, I ain't never going to see a time that is." Opening the innermost compartment of the pocket-book, she took out one of the three showily banded stubs it contained, and substituting this for the other in the holder, brought it to her mouth.

Steadily she smoked until the expiring end was burning the bone, then breathed a sigh of deep content, and walking to the boy, patted his drooping shoulder. "You're still looking mighty blue, son. Guess it's kind of hard coming to live with us poor folks after you been living on the steamboat, having just everything a body could wish for. When I think of all them big niggers you had to

MISSISSIPPI

wait on you, and the vittles them cooks on the Morning Glory throws away, I don't know whether I'd have come or not if it had been me. But kinfolks is kinfolks, ain't they? You'll get used to our ways and then you'll be happier than you was before."

She took up her stick and started toward the door. "I got to be going now. That foreman up at the button factory's been owing me fifteen cents for pretty near a month now and just been a-putting me off and putting me off. Hunk-o'-Bread Andy says he seen the postman give him a letter wrote with a typewriter this morning, so it sure looks like he's getting money." She hobbled briskly out the door.

The boy arose from the table, helped the girl wash the cracked dishes, then with her set off in the direction of the button factory. His face paled as he limped past the dreary building and saw the endless mounds of ashes and rotting paper stretching out over the gray waste that formed the dump beyond. But he forced himself to stumble on. In heap after heap they searched, finding broken stoves, shattered lawnmowers, washtubs pierced with great rusty holes, but nothing to serve as a cot. He came upon a wrecked wardrobe, whose long

MISSISSIPPI

boards he thought for a moment might be useful, and was examining them closer when a whistle sounded hoarsely behind him. Turning, he saw the Morning Glory steaming up the river. Patches of somber white spread quickly over his cheeks; his lips became bloodless; every impulse surging within him urged him to hide. But he stood immovable.

The girl reached down to pull out a striped and sooty piece of cardboard with four red circles flashing in the corners. She examined it curiously and held it out for his inspection. "It's mighty pretty, ain't it?" she asked.

He did not answer for a moment, watching as the boat made fast before the button factory. "It's a game they call parchesi. . . . I'll teach it to you if you want me to. . . . It'll make time go by when we're sitting in the shanty at night."

His eyes drifted off to the rousters scrambling to shore.

Towhead followed his glance and gazed at him wonderingly. "Seems like it'd be a mighty nice game with all these things look like stepladders on it. Just ain't had no luck learning games, somehow. A fellow from Perryville that was selling moonshine for some of the shanty people told me once he'd teach me a game was called checkers if I'd get

CHAPTER FIVE

HE carried the door to the shanty. Spending several hours reenforcing its shabby sides, he set it in his room, then took down a rusty rifle hanging on the wall, and went out to hunt. With the vigorous exercise his spirits lifted. When, as night fell, he sat down at the supper table where the rabbit he had shot lay steaming in a chipped platter, his freckled skin was ruddier and he ate his share of the food with appetite.

"I'm sure mighty glad you come, son," Aunt Vergie said a little later as she looked at the clean-picked bones in her plate, and licked her lips reminiscently. "Been needing a man in this shanty to get us things like this here rabbit. Shanty ain't nothing without a man." She gazed thoughtfully at a portion of the meat she had put at the side of the dish to be saved until the next day. "Guess I'd better get this here piece hid," she said as she arose and placed it carefully out of sight in the stove. "Hunk-o'-Bread Andy's coming over in a little while and he just lays his hands on everything he sees. Some of the other folks is coming over too. Going to kind of have a

MISSISSIPPI

party to celebrate States' coming back. Dog-gone it, I wish I could have got them fifteen cents this afternoon. I'd have bought some of that new kind of candy down at the store to give to them. Prettiest candy you ever seen. Looks just like meat. Sausages, hams, and pork chops, and everything. Bet there's plenty of butchers in Pine City couldn't tell the difference." She leaned over to drop a crumb of potato to the toad, who had hopped across the room and with a spotted foot was insistently tapping her shoes.

States watched it curiously. "What's its name?" he demanded of Towhead.

The girl hesitated. "Ain't got no name as I know of. Just kind of call him Toadie."

"Ought to have a name." The boy fed it a bit of rabbit. "When he pats your foot that way he looks just like Moss Jacks when he's fixing shoes up at his repairing place. Moss is fat, and goes round kind of swelled up about himself all the time just the way your toad does. Why don't you call him Professor Jacks, the way the people call Moss when they want to get him mad?"

Towhead's eyes became apprehensive. "It's a mighty pretty name. But Mr. Jacks would get mighty mad if he found out we was calling him that, wouldn't he?"

"Wouldn't do him no good if he did."

MISSISSIPPI

"Now don't you go to arguing with him, Tow-head," Aunt Vergie declared vigorously. "You know you couldn't get no prettier name than that. You do what States tells you to do. He's got a lot of learning, he has. You listen to him all the time and then you can get smart the same way he is."

"Yesm'm."

States stooped to scratch the toad's scaly back. The movement caused one of the button photographs on his shirt to fall to the floor. He picked it up and carefully restored it to the garment.

The girl and the old woman looked on admiringly.

"You're certainly mighty well fixed up with buttons, ain't you, son?" Aunt Vergie said. "Them mother-of-pearl ones on your pants are fine enough for anybody. But they ain't nothing to them on the shirt."

The boy warmed under the praise. "Kind of feel that way myself. Seems like candidates' buttons are mighty hard to get now. Ain't giving them away to nobody but voters, they says. All the three people that gave me these said they was only doing it 'cause me and them was personal friends. Zep Wethers was saying the other day up at the barber shop it's because the turtles they get the celluloid from are

MISSISSIPPI

dying out. But I don't know." He gazed at the faded dress of the girl a moment and twisted the button thoughtfully in his fingers. "Maybe you'd like to have one of them. I got three. And two's all a fellow needs."

Her wan face became radiant. "I'd mighty like to have one. But you can't spare it, can you?"

"I'll get along without it. Which one you wanting?"

She bent over and eagerly touched the velvety surfaces with her finger. "I declare I don't know, they're all so pretty. Guess maybe you'd better pick one out for me."

"I don't know which to give you neither." He took them from his shirt and spread them out in his palm. "This one of Abe Capps running for county clerk is nice with them three red stars on the bottom, and that one of Newt Pillow's brother running for treasurer is sure mighty fine with that blue ribbon hanging down and the gold writing saying he's pretty near fifty and ain't had a public office yet. Looks like he's right there talking to you. Still that there one of Judge Stubbs running for school superintendent is made like a flag, ain't it, all red, white, and blue, and I guess you can't ever do no better than take a flag."

MISSISSIPPI

"Guess you can't." Her voice was wistful. "But maybe I'd rather have the one with the ribbons on it if I can. I just don't seem to be able to get no ribbons."

"Ribbons is better for a girl, ain't they?"

Delightedly she took it from him and pinned it to her dress.

There was a step outside and two shantymen entered, one a perspiring little individual wearing an oily fragment of a straw hat, a grimy pair of trousers, and a shirt made of a piece of oilcloth flaking off in dull yellow scales, whom the boy knew bore the name of Little Greasy; the other a shaggy giant called Buffalo, with a great mane of hair hanging down raggedly over his immense shoulders, and a hook which took the place of a missing hand. They greeted the boy cordially, and sat down on one of the dilapidated beds.

One by one the other shanty-boaters drifted into the little cabin: Preaching Daniel, constantly jerking up his splattered coat tails as they caught on the nails of the floor; Hunk-o'-Bread Andy, who a moment after his entrance furtively took a piece of bread from the table and tucked it into a pocket of one of his bulging suits; gaunt women, clad in angular aprons, smoking clay pipes or poking long sticks touched with snuff up their bony noses; chil-

MISSISSIPPI

dren gnawing at pieces of bread or burying sticky faces in crescents of watermelon; lazy-bearded men, followed by woebegone dogs whose legs were constantly whirring like fan blades to scratch their flea-bitten sides. Each as they arrived came forward to shake the boy's hand, then retreated to squat down on boxes or the ragged strips of carpet on the floor.

Another figure stepped into the doorway, a skinny, towering man with bony, bare arms covered by fine, snowy hairs which gave him something of the appearance of a gigantic, white spider. His head was close-cropped as though it had recently felt the clippers of a prison barber; a thin red scar circling his naked ankle suggested a ball and chain.

The newcomer, whom States instantly recognized as White Johnny, most prominent and most criminal member of the colony, shuffled into the room, filling it with the acrid odor of corn mash with which his clothes were reeking. Exchanging a word with Buffalo, who was standing near the entrance, he gave the shaggy man the earthen jug he was carrying, and advancing to the boy, surveyed him quizzically. Then his sullen eyes brightened with friendliness. He took a step nearer and thrust out his hand.

"You're all right, son," he grunted. "Chicken

MISSISSIPPI

Sam said you was before he went away, and looks like he knowed what he was talking about."

States' face grew grave at the memory. "I—oughtn't to have shot him."

"Now don't you go to worrying about that. Nobody's holding that against you. You ain't to blame for what you didn't know. You done a lot for him and us shanty people ain't going to forget it. I got a bad name, but I ain't as bad as I look when I ain't drunk and people treat me right. If there's anything you want around here, you tell me and I'll get it for you." He took a bottle of vanilla from his pocket and poured a few drops onto his coat. "Get mighty sick of the smell of this corn mash sometimes. When you put this here on once in a while it ain't so bad." His eyes grew sullen. "How'd Captain Lilly do when you went away? Act up pretty bad? Try to kill you, maybe?"

"I guess . . . he was sorry."

"Wish he had tried to kill you. Then I'd 'a' had a good excuse for killing him. You ain't the only one that he's done something to. I got plenty to get even with him about. Getting me caught in that raid three years ago and making me lay rotting in jail all them months. Doc Claymore liked staying in jail, but I ain't that kind. I'll pay him back, though,

MISSISSIPPI

one of these days, you'll see. Don't you forget now. Anything you want around here, you come and ask me." He sat down on a box near by, took a drink from the jug Little Greasy hastily passed him, and turned to Aunt Vergie, who was at the sink washing dishes. "How about getting us warmed up a little, Vergie? Play us a record on your phonograph." He nudged the boy with his skinny finger and winked broadly. "This here's going to be funny," he whispered.

The old woman wiped her greasy hands on a cloth and moved to the rusty machine in the corner. States watched her and turned to Towhead in bewilderment. "You told me just before supper when I was looking that there wasn't any records. You must have been fooling me or something. How can she play it if there ain't none?"

Towhead's fingers strayed gently over the blue ribbon now shining radiantly at her breast. "There ain't no records exactly. She just starts the machine going and all the time it's running sings something. She says figuring she knows a couple of hundred songs, that way she's got more records than anybody in Beaver Slough."

Aunt Vergie took a key and wound the spring vigorously. "What'll I play you, folks?"

MISSISSIPPI

The buzz of conversation ceased a moment as the guests reflected.

"How about 'I Don't Like a Steamboat Man'?" rumbled Buffalo. "Best shanty song there is that I know of."

The old woman glanced at States and shook her head. "I don't want to play that one. It'd make States feel bad, maybe."

"Course it ain't going to make him feel bad," White Johnny flashed. "He's a shantyman now. He ain't a steamboater no more."

Aunt Vergie pressed a catch at the top of the battered tin case. A wheel somewhere inside it clicked harshly; the scratched turntable began a creaky spinning. With her hand on the table where the instrument lay, Aunt Vergie faced the company, and tilting back her withered head until her eyes rested on the ceiling, began to sing. Piercingly, in a high, nasal voice, she chanted the verses, and bracing her wooden leg against the wall, wailed the chorus which formed their climax:

"Oh, I don't like a steamboat man.
Oh, I don't like a steamboat man.
He'll swamp you, he'll torment you,
He'll drown you if he can.
Oh, I don't like a steamboat man."

MISSISSIPPI

Her voice grew slower and slower as the speed of the metal disc began to slacken; broke off sharply as the wheels beneath grated and the machine clicked to a stop.

States did not join in the applause which followed. A dilapidated dog, driven from its refuge at the other end of the room, crawled hesitantly beside his chair, and finding itself unmolested, stretched its head gratefully over his feet. He reached down and patted it.

White Johnny, looking round a few moments later as the old woman ceased her performance, saw the boy's hand still caressing the forlorn animal and smiled sympathetically. "You're kind of lonesome, ain't you, son?"

"Guess I am, a little."

"Ain't much here, is there? But you'll get used to it. Maybe a dog'd help you. . . . You like to have a dog?"

"I'd mighty like to have a dog."

White Johnny turned to Towhead. "You ain't got no dog, have you, Towhead?"

The girl shook her head regretfully. "Ain't got no dog at all. Ain't had none since that kind of shepherd dog I had got something the matter with his throat and died. Aunt Vergie got a fellow that

MISSISSIPPI

had never seen his father to breathe down his mouth, the way Nigger Sue said, but it didn't do no good. Guess he was a-lying to get the money she gave him, or else he had seen his father without knowing."

White Johnny meditated an instant, then motioned to Buffalo, who between drinks was sharpening the hook which served as his hand.

They went outside.

A fat, bouncing little woman with a flour-smeared dress bustled in carrying a dish in which lay half a dozen rainbow-hued cakes and presented them to the boy. "They're coconut and marshmellow mixed," she explained cordially. "My old man sent them to you. He's been ailing with his stomach and a charity woman that was down this afternoon give me some money to get him some medicine. But I knowed he'd rather spend it getting these cakes. We both just ate all we could, they tasted so nice, and he said he wanted you to have some sure. He'd have come himself, but his stomach's kind of giving him the miseries again."

The boy thanked her and taking one of the pulpy confections, offered the dish to Towhead. As he did so a certain familiarity with the design of the gaudy-flowered border struck him; in an instant he realized that it was part of a set stolen from the

MISSISSIPPI

wharf-boat of the Morning Glory half a year before. He chewed his lips and said nothing.

A cadaverous woman with snaky black hair and a single yellow tooth showing in her shrunken mouth arose from an inverted nail-keg at the window. "What about holding a Holiness meeting, Vergie?" she called shrilly.

"I sure ain't got no objection," the questioned one responded. "What you say, Daniel? You want to start it?"

The black-coated man nodded funereally, and arising, cleared a space in the center of the room. Here he set three boxes side by side, and inviting Hunk-o'-Bread Andy and the yellow-toothed woman to seat themselves, took the place between. Soon the other visitors had gathered in a circle about them. Waiting until they became quiet, Preaching Daniel took a shabby volume from his pocket and hoarsely commenced to sing a hymn. The yellow-toothed woman joined in droningly. Hunk-o'-Bread Andy buttoned up his outermost coat from one of whose pockets a great chunk of bread was slipping, and tonelessly bawling the melody, began vigorously slapping out the time on his knees. In a moment the room was reverberating with a shrill, discordant chorus.

MISSISSIPPI

Hymn followed hymn without cessation. Then the somber-visaged leader closed his book and one by one surveying the bizarre faces about him, gloomily demanded: "Who's going to speak the word?" There was no answer.

"Who's going to speak the word?" The voice was harsh now, commanding.

Again there was no answer. The worshipers turned away from the fierce, accusing stare of the questioner and shifted uneasily. The atmosphere grew tense, electric. A frightened child stumbled whimpering across the room to its mother. A screech owl outside the window cried eerily.

Suddenly, as though the box on which he sat had been touched with fire, Hunk-o'-Bread Andy leaped high into the air. "I'm getting it, Lord!" he shouted hysterically. "Glory to the Lord! I'm getting it!"

"Glory!" echoed the worshipers, bursting from their trance in frenzied exultation. "Halleluiah! Halleluiah! Bless the Lord!"

"Bless the Lord for giving the word to Brother Andy!" rumbled the preacher.

The seized one leaped again, and jerking his arms and legs up and down like a toy monkey with movements controlled by a string, began dancing in great delirious circles. "Bless the Lord for making



*"Glory!" echoed the worshipers,
bursting from their trance
in frenzied exultation.*

MISSISSIPPI

me see the light!" he shouted. "I used to be a bad man! I used to shoot and steal! But I'm a good man now, Lord! I'm Holiness Folks! Bless the Lord for Holiness Folks! I used to belong to one of them highfaluting churches! One of them rich churches where they has preachers, Lord, and cushions made of velvet in the seats! And what do they do with them seats, Lord, when they ought to be worshiping You? All they do is sit on them! All they do is sit on them! Holiness Folks don't want that kind of church. Holiness Folks ain't going to be satisfied with that kind of religion. Holiness Folks wants a sign You're with 'em. Holiness Folks wants You to make 'em dance and roll and laugh and shake, so they'll know You're with 'em. So they'll know You love 'em. Oh, I could lie on my back all the day and kick my heels right up to the angels in the sky just to show the way I love my Lord!"

He whirled wildly into the air again. The piece of bread in his coat flew out and dropped dully to the floor. The dog lying at States' feet bounded up and began devouring it greedily. Another dog, then another, bolted out from under one of the beds and flinging themselves upon the first, sought to wrest the prize away. Furious snarls and yelps of agony drowned the chanting of the worshipers. Sprays of crumbs flew over the writhing, flea-bitten bodies.

MISSISSIPPI

There was a sudden cry, shriller, piercing, and the yellow-toothed woman bounded from her seat and flung herself upon the floor. Passionately she beat her head against the rough-hewn boards, then rose to her knees and displaying a foam-flecked, hypnotic face to the watchers crowded around her, began a feverish, incoherent babbling, like the sounds made by a child before it has learned to speak.

"Glory be to the Lord for Sister Jessie!" the preacher shouted. "She's giving us the Lord's message! She's talking in tongues!"

The flour-smeared woman and a wan-eyed child behind her stepped out into the cleared area and joined Hunk-o'-Bread Andy in his mad gyrations. Others caught the furious contagion. The shabby furniture began to caper as the floor quivered under the heavy pounding of their feet. The two framed pictures swung dizzily. Great cracks appeared in the paper on the walls.

With a grunt of exhaustion Hunk-o'-Bread Andy slumped back onto his box and began wiping his streaming face with a rag. The frenzy of the others quickly subsided. Adjusting their disarranged clothing, they returned to their places.

A step sounded outside the door again, and White Johnny reappeared, carrying a sugar-sack heavy with the weight of something struggling within.

MISSISSIPPI

He set his burden down before the boy and grinned triumphantly. "It's a dog," he said. "I kind of think you'll like him."

States, still bewildered by the riotous scene he had just witnessed, loosened the string with which the sack was tied and pulled open the top. A dog came scrambling out, leaped onto the boy's lap, and frantically wagging his tail, began covering States' face with joyous licks of his tongue. It was Shoo Fly.

States gasped.

White Johnny, who had reddened with liquor in his absence, grew impatient as, after a moment's waiting, he saw that the boy made no move to thank him. "I'll be dog-goned, son," he grunted. "Ain't you glad to see your dog?"

"Yes . . . I'm glad to see him."

"What's the matter with you then? What you looking that way for?"

"I . . . just wish you hadn't brought him, that's all."

The shantyman's face grew stern. "I declare, I'm going to get mad at you, son. . . . But I guess you're just a boy, ain't you, and you can't help it if you've still got some of them steamboat notions about you. I ain't going to start no argument with a boy."

MISSISSIPPI

"How'd you get him?" put in Little Greasy eagerly.

"Wasn't no trouble at all. The boat was just laying at the Hanging Dog landing getting ready to come back, and I just got out on the barge and meowed like a cat till the dog came out to chase me. After I took him, I dropped one of them pay slips I found up at the construction camp there on the bank, so Captain Lilly 'll sure think it's one of their niggers."

A great June-bug buzzed through the door, and the dog scrambled down to point it excitedly. White Johnny roared out his approval, and catching two flies sleeping along the wall, tossed them into the air. Two sticky children began to imitate him. Soon a half-dozen flies were buzzing sleepily near the smoky lamp. The dog, confused, sat down on his haunches and gazed at his young master for guidance. White Johnny tossed him one of the cakes from the dish, thrust viciously with his foot at a hungry nose darting out from beneath the bed to seize it, and took a long drink from the earthen jug.

The passing of the jug from hand to hand grew faster. Soon its contents were exhausted. White Johnny, who was beginning to be drunk, shuffled off to his cabin and returned with a new supply.

MISSISSIPPI

This too was quickly emptied. The shantymen grew gayer. Little Greasy arose and began to do a clog dance. White Johnny, now thoroughly drunk, applauded hilariously. With a hoot of glee he tossed another fly to the dog, and offered him a plug of tobacco.

Up the river sounded the deep, vibrant whistle of the Morning Glory. States moved to the window and glancing out saw the vessel steaming over the shimmering water, the two green and red lamps at her bow blinking beneath the fire-tipped stacks like the eyes of some dragon searching for its prey in the black willows. The lights came nearer, now were alongside the shanty; the dilapidated structure began to rock crazily as the waves from the foaming paddle struck the flimsy hull. The yellow-toothed woman was thrown against the wall and began to rub a bruised arm; the dish where three marshmallow cakes still lay resplendently scudded from the table and slid onto the floor. The two dogs beneath the bed shot out and snatched the scattering confections from beneath the hands of a trio of scrambling children.

White Johnny, who was again holding a jug, delivering a drunken harangue to Buffalo, fell sprawling. The jug, still in his fingers, shattered in

MISSISSIPPI

two great sections against the floor; in a rage, he gained his feet, and flung a great fragment at the window where the blinking lights were gliding swiftly past. The two cobwebbed panes crashed explosively. Glass and parts of the frame shot out into the river. Darting toward it, his face contorted with drunken malevolence, he thrust his head out in the hole he had created, and shook his fist wildly at the disappearing ship. "That's right!" he screamed. "Go fast as you can! Smash her! Swamp her! Drown everybody on her! The way the song says! You don't care what you do! The law won't do nothing to you! We're just river rats! We're just white trash! Lower than niggers! You ain't rocking her enough! Rock her more! More! Rock her till she turns over! Rock till everybody on her is lying on the bottom of the river!"

The steamer vanished down the stream. The rolling of the shanty gradually ceased. White Johnny drew in his head, and cursing vehemently, sat down and began picking slivers of glass from the top of his shirt.

"He does all that rocking just on purpose to spite us," Little Greasy muttered. "Wouldn't hurt him nothing to slow down. One of these days he's going to wreck himself going that way."

MISSISSIPPI

"By God, we ought to do it without waiting for it to happen," White Johnny grunted. "Ain't he done enough to us shanty people? Getting ready to do more, too. When I was up to get the dog I seen him and Judge Ash talking mighty thick. Figuring up another raid, to put more shanty people in jail. If we wrecked his boat, maybe he'd leave us alone."

"There ain't nothing I'd like to see better," put in Little Greasy. "But the trouble about doing that is you get caught. And they wouldn't treat you the same way for busting up a boat that they would for just stealing."

"You don't have to get caught." White Johnny reflected drunkenly a moment. "What about all them barrels of gasoline they brought up from Pine City today that I seen laying down at the wharf? You ain't going to get caught if you just drop a match down one of them, are you? There's plenty of fires that happen that way and people says they're just accidents. Doggone it, I'll do it, if a couple of fellows 'll go with me to keep watch, so we're sure nobody's looking."

"I'll go," Buffalo rumbled. "How about you, Greasy?"

"Well, if there's something going on, I guess I ought to be in it, too."

MISSISSIPPI

They collected a few pieces of rags from a box in the corner, and started toward the doorway.

States, who had been watching, arose and hurrying to the doorway, blocked their path. "You ain't going," he said tensely.

White Johnny looked at him in drunken astonishment. "What you saying, boy?"

"I said you ain't going."

"What's going to stop us?"

"I am."

White Johnny seized the boy's arm with a fierceness that dug his skinny fingers far into the flesh, then hooted in maudlin glee.

The boy's set countenance did not change. "You can laugh if you want to. But I'm going to stop you. Oh, I know I ain't big enough to do it with a gun or nothing. But if you don't stop, I'm just going to get the sheriff, that's all."

White Johnny's face quivered passionately an instant, then stiffened grimly as he brought himself under control. "I tried to be friends with you when you come here, boy. But it looks like you're trying to get me against you. And I ain't a good one to have that way. I forgot about the way you acted when I brought you the dog. Because you're a boy and I wanted to be easy with you. But about this

MISSISSIPPI

here, I ain't going to forget. Now you get away from that doorway before I have to hurt you."

"White Johnny's right, son," Buffalo said amiably. "Looks to me like you're doing wrong. These here's your own people. You come to them. What they want to do you ought to want to do. You can't be a shantyman and Captain Lilly's boy both. You seen our ways of doing things tonight. And if you don't like them, my advice is to get."

"You are my own people, and I want to stay with you. But I ain't going to let you set fire to no steamboat. You're all crazy drunk, or you wouldn't be talking about it."

"Are you going to get out of the way?"

"Nope."

"All right, I'll knock you out." White Johnny upraised his fist menacingly.

Aunt Vergie hobbled forward and indignantly thrust herself before him. "Ain't you done enough for one night smashing up my window without picking on a boy that ain't harmed nobody?" she flashed. "Course he ought to stop you. Anybody that's got more sense than a blue jay ought to stop you. What'll happen if you do it? They'll see you and then you'll get caught and hung, that's what you'll get. And the rest of us'll get arrested or

MISSISSIPPI

chased out of the county and have to go to living down in Nigger Skull Swamp again, the way we done when they ran us out before. Don't you lay a hand on that boy, or I'll go get the sheriff myself."

White Johnny stared at her, but did not continue his attack.

"Guess she's right," Buffalo declared. "Can't start a fire without a light, and the minute you have a light there's sure to be somebody sees it. Or the gasoline'll explode before you figure and you'll get burned bad."

"Guess we sure are drunk," put in Little Greasy. "Like Vergie says, if you did get caught doing a thing like that there's no telling what could happen to you. You wouldn't get tried before Judge Ash, neither. They'd take you down to Pine City. And they says that judge down there is getting terrible. A man was telling me the other day that he sent a couple of fellows to jail just for killing a nigger."

White Johnny glowered an instant longer, then tossed the rag he was holding into the corner. "All right, all right," he grumbled.

The boy moved off from the doorway. White Johnny slumped onto the bed and stared at him moodily. A few moments later he arose. "Ain't going to stay in the same room with a pack of cowards,"

MISSISSIPPI

he grunted, and with the jug in his hand stumbled off to his cabin.

The others quickly followed his example. The two woebegone dogs, the last of the visitors to go, crawled out from beneath the bed, and casting wistful glances at the single cake still on the table, slunk out the doorway.

Soon after States bade the girl and the old woman good night. Giving a caress to Shoo Fly who had curled comfortably against the wall separating his room from that of the women, he climbed onto the screen door which formed his bed, and fell asleep.

He awoke perhaps two hours later with a prickly sensation all over his body as though he had fallen into a fiery patch of nettles and a noise in his ears like a dull drumbeat sounding steadily somewhere beneath him. Lighting his candle, he looked down and saw a paw striking quickly against the floor as it returned from a furious scratching of the dog's body; glancing at himself he saw that his skin was covered with fleas. He brushed off as many as he could with his hand, picked up his clothes, and followed by the dog, slipped quietly outside. Plunging into the river, he remained until he was certain the insects had vanished, then emerged, and drying

MISSISSIPPI

himself and the dog with a towel he had brought from the steamboat, stretched out under a tree.

There he lay looking off at a shanty crowned with a broken water pitcher as chimney-pot, where occasional glimpses of a long spidery silhouette in the window and riotous hoots constantly echoing out over the river proclaimed that White Johnny was still at his potations.

A tiny spider dropped from a branch overhead onto the boy's wrist. Picking it up, by the light of a match he set it at the base of the life line in his palm and watched its hurried course across the calloused skin. He shook his head gravely. "It went straight to the left, Shoo Fly," he muttered. "Looks like things is going to be bad."

CHAPTER SIX

HE awoke at dawn and creeping quietly back into his room so that the old woman and the girl would not know he had left it, waited until he heard them stirring, then stepped outside and washed himself in the stream.

Greeting Towhead and Aunt Vergie cheerfully, he was able by constant effort to continue a pose of gaiety through most of the day. But as late in the afternoon he heard the Morning Glory come to her customary halt at the button factory, his blitheness suddenly collapsed. Putting down the knife with which he had been helping Towhead open the mussels, he stared off in the direction of the boat. His face set with resolution. Limping over to Shoo Fly, who was busily rummaging in a pile of rope, he took the animal in his arms, and moved to the door.

Towhead glanced at him in alarm. "You ain't going back to the boat, are you?" she demanded, trembling.

He shook his head. "I'm going to give the dog a

MISSISSIPPI

chance to go back. I ain't going to keep a dog if it don't want to stay."

He walked to the path leading off to the willows above whose tops the smoke of the vessel was rising, and putting the dog on the ground, walked rapidly away. The terrier gazed after him brightly, wagged his tail furiously a moment, then bounded down the path at his heels.

The boy halted. "Get on back, Shoo Fly," he commanded stoically.

The dog gazed at him in bewilderment, then slowly went off through the trees.

Miserably the boy stumbled down the trail to Shantytown. He had advanced only a short distance, halting every few feet to turn and look forlornly behind him, when there was a quick crashing of the brush at his side. Turning quickly, he saw the dog come bursting through the trees, bearing a tiny rabbit in his mouth. The boy's face became radiant. Releasing the furry creature while Shoo Fly watched reproachfully, he took the dog eagerly in his arms once more and happily limped back to the shanty.

His cheerfulness diminished a little as White Johnny passed and seeing him on the porch, stopped to deliver a few labored sarcasms; became bitterness again as after supper he climbed into the bed which

MISSISSIPPI

he had now made habitable, and listened to the whistling of the far-off vessels steaming down the Mississippi.

After the first few days, he was no longer able to conceal his unhappiness from those about him. In a week his face was vividly manifesting his misery. His flashing eyes began to lose their radiance, his cheeks became wan and hollow, his broken tooth ached constantly.

The dog and a corner of the shanty he had fitted up as a pilot-house formed his only solace. Here, when there was no one to observe, he would take a seat next a wall covered with laboriously drawn river charts, call Shoo Fly to him and setting a gold-braided pilot's cap on the dog's head and a stogie in the barking mouth beneath, take hold of a wagon wheel in whose rim he had set a score of clothespins as handles, and steer down an imaginary river. Now he would shout an order into speaking-tubes made of sunflower stalks topped with two of Aunt Vergie's funnels, now he would halt the vessel to start it again with a great clanging of the cow-bell over his head, all the while spitting tobacco expertly, luxuriously, into the two cuspidors set on either side. When he arose his cheeks were always flushed with pleasure. But the exhilaration was only momentary.

MISSISSIPPI

Half an hour later gloominess had once more overcome him.

His dejection after a fortnight had become so constant that Aunt Vergie began to comment on it sharply. "I declare, I don't know what's going to become of you, son," she said, as she polished with a piece of moss the funeral plates hanging on the wall, and watched him push away untouched the strip of bacon on the dish before him. "You don't eat nothing and you don't sleep and your face is getting all twisted up like the monkey that Italian fellow had what come here last year. Towhead and me's done all we can to make you comfortable, but it don't seem to help none. I don't know what to do to you, unless it's to get you married to some nice shanty girl. Towhead, maybe."

"I ain't wanting to get married."

"You can't keep on having the miseries the way you been doing. I'm mighty wanting you to stay, and Towhead is too, but I declare if it wasn't wronging your pappy I'd tell you to go back to the steamboat." She moistened the moss at her lips. "Too bad your pappy ain't alive to talk to you. He'd of smoothed you out in just a couple of minutes. Smart fellow, he was. Smartest I ever seen. Just had a powerful temper, that's what caused him all his

MISSISSIPPI

troubles. This here's the plate come from his coffin. That one next it is your mammy's. Mighty pretty plate, ain't it? And always stays so nice and shiny. It ain't like this one of your Aunt Arneedy just keeps on covering over with rust so a body ain't got nothing to do but stand and clean it all day long. I always said that Arneedy was a bad one when she was living, and it looks to me the way this plate's behaving shows I was right. If she wasn't kinfolk, I'd sure throw it out."

She set the moss against the blurred metal and scoured it vigorously. "Yes sir, it's just too bad you can't have a talk with your pappy and ask him what you ought to do. 'Course there's a way of talking to him if he ain't mad against you or anything."

States looked at her in bewilderment. "You're talking mighty silly, ain't you, Aunt Vergie? How can I talk to him when he's dead? You mean praying to him, maybe?"

"'Course I don't mean praying. That's talking to the Lord. I mean cooking him a Dumb Supper. You've heared about that, ain't you?"

"I've heard Ham Hawk talking something about it. But I just figured it was nigger foolishness."

"It ain't no foolishness. I seen it work plenty of

MISSISSIPPI

times. Plenty. Look at that Jerusha Etty that was my pappy's brother's girl. This here's her plate. Used to have a couple of little lilies painted on it, but it ain't got them no more. Her husband got shot moonshining down in Perryville and he had left some money buried and naturally she wanted to get it. So she got Nigger Sue to cook her a Dumb Supper and he come back and told her it was in a teakettle hid under a old elm down in Nigger Skull. And she took a pickax and dug, and sure enough it was there. Then there was that humpback nigger that catches fish for Newt Pillow. Didn't his baby girl get sick about a year after its mammy died, and just lay tossing and tossing with the fever and none of the doctors couldn't do anything for it? He cooked a Supper for his wife and when she come she told him the fever was being caused by too much electricity in its body and if he'd put a knife under the mattress where it was laying it would draw the electricity away. He done it, and it got well in a couple of days. I thought everybody had heard about that."

"I did hear about it. But I didn't know it was no Dumb Supper."

"'Course you didn't. Niggers ain't going to tell you the way they does things 'cause they know

MISSISSIPPI

you'll laugh at 'em. And then how about these goings on now down in Pine City where this here woman from New Orleans gets a lot of people to hold hands in the dark around a table? Don't the spirits come and lift the table right off the floor, and ring bells and talk to all of them that's sitting in the room—just through a plain ordinary funnel anybody can get for a nickel up at the hardware store? Miss Goldie was there, they says, and her mother come and talked to her. Miss Goldie asked her if she was still having fainting spells and she said she was but they was getting better. If people like Miss Goldie can do it, I guess you can."

"That ain't a Dumb Supper."

"I ain't saying it is, but it's the same thing. The more I think about it, the more it looks to me like talking to your pappy is just the thing you ought to do. When I get through eating I'll take you over to Sue's and see if she'll fix up the Supper for you."

States twirled the bacon on the end of his fork. "Nigger Sue ain't nobody to make the dead come back. The woman down in Pine City is different. There's been writing in the paper about her. I seen it. Sue's just a crazy nigger. She ain't been out of that asylum in Perryville more than three years. All you got to do to know she's crazy is just to

MISSISSIPPI

look at her carrying that wagon umbrella over her no matter what kind of weather it is, nor whether it's day or night."

"I ain't saying she ain't crazy. It's being crazy that gives her the power. I declare you're the stubbornest person ever seen."

She continued to heap her arguments relentlessly upon him until at last through sheer weariness his resistance was broken, then took his arm, and with Towhead behind her swept him out the door. They came to a halt before the shanty where the great wagon umbrella swayed gently at the bow, and knocked. There was a shuffle of slippered feet within and a shrill voice called: "Who's there?"

"Just me, Sue. Vergie."

The slippered footsteps came closer and a fat negress appeared in the doorway. "Come in, folks. Come in," she said cordially, and invited them to take seats on sawed-off flour barrels.

States gazed at her curiously. There was little of the abnormal, little even of the unusual in either her appearance or her manner to suggest the supernatural reputation he knew she had acquired among the negroes of Beaver Slough. Around her kinky hair, stiff with unguent, was tied a brilliant red handkerchief; over her dress of the same gay hue was a

MISSISSIPPI

faded yellow apron, whose strings cut deep into her spongy flesh and formed her waist. Only occasionally, and then but for an instant, her eyes suddenly glazed in the fashion characteristic of those touched with insanity.

"How's your leg getting on, Vergie?" she asked, after a moment's genial conversation, as she reached out and touched the broomstick taking the place of the missing limb.

"Ain't getting no better at all. Every night it starts doing something different, itching or kicking or squirming around till it gets my whole body all twisted up. Dog-gone, I'd like to get that doctor that buried it." She turned to States. "This here's my old man's sister's boy. Guess you know him already, don't you? He ain't shanty trash like us. It's him that's been living on the steamboat."

"Um-huh. What's he wanting? To get his leg cured too?"

"Nope. He's wanting you to fix a Dumb Supper for his pappy, Catfish Etty. You remember him."

The negress shook her head. "Can't cook no Dumb Supper tonight, son. Spirits can't come when the moon's shining on them or the stars is out to see them. You got to cook it when the sky's all covered over with clouds. When a big storm's blowing and

MISSISSIPPI

the thunder's rocking. Then when the lightning's flashing they can come riding down."

Aunt Vergie set a cigar stub in the bone holder. "Dog-gone it, bet that's how them witches come down that was bothering me so bad last week. Just rode me all over this here county. Rode me way past Hanging Dog and pretty near up to Granny Run and then come back and took me all the way up to Pine City before they let me go. Just rode me so hard there wasn't a bone in my body that wasn't aching when I waked up." She struck a match and began to smoke contentedly. "Next time there's a storm will you come over and cook it for him?"

"'Course I will."

"Guess you need something kind of special for it, don't you?"

"Don't make no difference. Just so long as it's meat."

A great brown rat thrust its head from beneath a dilapidated bureau, furtively examined the newcomers, then scurried upon the table beside which the negress was sitting and began nibbling at a piece of bread lying in a cracked plate. An instant later, Shoo Fly, who had followed his master but had remained outside to sniff at a fox hole, trotted gaily through the door, and seeing the brown head

MISSISSIPPI

bobbing in the dish, leaped wildly toward it. The fragile table upset noisily. The rat darted beneath the bureau again and bared its long teeth, while the dog raced in pursuit and grimly taking up a post a few inches away, began menacing it with quick, wary snaps of his jaws.

With a frightened cry the negress darted to the bureau, and trembling, thrust herself in front of the attacker. "Get that dog out of here, boy," she flashed. "That there rat's done had the sign."

States caught up Shoo Fly and carried him outside. The fright in the negress's eyes vanished. A moment after, the visitors took their departure.

The next few days were cloudless. But about a week later, as States trundled a load of mussel-shells off to the button factory he noticed that the air was beginning to be sticky, oppressive; when he returned to the shanty for supper, thunder was rumbling dully in the distance.

"Sue's coming over tonight," Aunt Vergie announced, as she added some salt to a soup-bone boiling in a pot. "I seen her just a little while ago, and she said it looks to her like it's blowing up for a mighty good Dumb Supper. When we get through eating, me and Towhead'll go over to Buffalo's, so you can have the shanty to yourself."

"I don't believe there's nothing to it," States as-

MISSISSIPPI

serted as he sat down at the table. "But I'll do it just to please you 'cause I know you ain't going to let me get no rest till I do."

"Well, if I am nagging you, it's for your own good. You can't keep on being miserable the way you are all the time." She put the meat in a platter and set it on the table. "After your pappy comes, you ain't going to be worrying any more, you'll see. You just ask him what you ought to do. And he'll tell you right. 'Cause he was a mighty smart man.

"Don't you get him mad, though. Or don't you go to arguing with him the way you argues with me. If he tells you you ought to go back to the steamboat, I'd get right up and go tomorrow. And if he says it'd be wronging him to go, I'd mighty quick get all such thoughts out of my head. 'Cause there's mighty terrible things comes on you if you don't do what a spirit tells you. I knowed a man was told by his dead mother to quit beating his wife and he didn't do it, but kept on beating her worse and worse. Well, just about a week later the sheriff come and found him laying dead in bed. And all over his body were whip marks that hadn't been put there by no human hand. . . . This here chunk of meat I left in the frying-pan is for you to do the cooking with."

MISSISSIPPI

They finished their meal by lamplight. The old woman cleared away the dishes and searching in the recesses of a broken chest, gingerly took out a frayed piece of rope. "This come from a murderer that was hanged down at Perryville," she explained, putting it into the boy's hand. "A fellow that was running away from jail give it to me once for getting him some vittles when I seen him hiding down in Nigger Skull. I been kind of scared of it, but they says that as long as you got it in your clothes nothing can harm you. 'Course your pappy is your pappy, dead or alive. But he is a ghost and you're a kind of contradicting boy, and I think I'd be feeling easier if you had this here on you."

The boy slipped it into his pocket.

Aunt Vergie and Towhead hurried off toward the abandoned street-car which Buffalo made his home.

A soft wind began to crackle the leaves of the scorched willows. States moved to the shore, and tightened the two heavy ropes mooring the vessel to the sprawling oak beneath which it lay. About him in the trees he could hear the birds piping hushed, nervous warning to their broods; from the brush arose the faint rustle of tiny animals hurrying to their shelters. Down the water he could see Preaching Daniel reenforcing his roof with a great

MISSISSIPPI

piece of tin; beyond him Hunk-o'-Bread Andy was clumsily nailing strips of wood upon the great sagging slabs of cardboard which formed his shanty's walls. He remained there watching two ebony plumes of clouds scudding toward the moon until the fierce stinging of the storm-goaded flies became intolerable, then went inside and restlessly began to glance through the pages of a mail-order catalogue he had obtained that day in the town.

The rumble of the thunder grew louder, the blurred lightning flashes became long, sullen streaks darting like golden snakes along the black horizon. The murmur of the wind became a low, mournful sighing. The boy put away the book. Reaching up to a shelf covered with fishing tackle, he took down a pan in which a score of minnows were swimming, and dropped tiny bits of meat into the water.

A step sounded outside.

He restored the can to its place on the shelf and looking out as a sudden gust slammed the door violently, saw Nigger Sue approaching, her huge umbrella tossing like a great balloon ripped loose from its moorings.

She folded it hastily and put it down at the doorway. "Going to be a bad storm, chile."

"Um-huh."

MISSISSIPPI

She waddled across the room and puffing from the exertion, wiped her sweating face on her yellow apron. "Got everything ready for me?"

"Um-huh."

"Where's the meat?"

"Over there. On the table."

She looked at it closely, then moved to the stove, and shaking out the ashes until they were extinct, thrust fresh wood into the grating and made it ready for lighting anew. Next she took down a rusty frying-pan from a nail, scoured it vigorously, and dropping the meat into it, sprinkled it with a yellow powder she took from a battered snuff-box. She began a low, mournful crooning. For several minutes she continued thus, while the sighing of the wind rose to a steady howl which set the license plates forming the roof of the shanty to rattling like dice flung down by angry giants.

Shoo Fly, who had been sitting off in the corner, came forward to sniff curiously at her tattered shoes.

She wheeled in fright. "Get that dog out of here, chile," she muttered.

The boy carried the terrier into the room where he slept and closed the door.

The negress looked anxiously at her heels to see if she had been bitten. Examining the walls in the



*He saw Nigger Sue approach-
ing, her huge umbrella tossing
like a great balloon ripped
loose from its moorings.*

MISSISSIPPI

vicinity of the stove, she covered up with strips of newspaper any faces showing in the pictures with which the boards were covered. Chancing to turn toward the boy, she saw the two candidates' buttons on his shirt. She detached them quickly and laid them face down on a shelf.

The cuckoo clock ticking faintly drew her attention. Waddling to it, she stopped the swinging pendulum. A moment later, she returned to the stove to resume her mournful crooning, then with a great puff of her fat cheeks, blew out the light.

"I'm going now," she muttered. "Light the fire and think about your pappy. And when the thunder's a-rocking and the lightning's blazing he'll come to you. Maybe he'll come riding, maybe he'll come walking, maybe he'll come flying through the air. But don't you make no noise while you're waiting for him. Don't you whisper, don't you cry out, till you see his face shining before you. Death's standing close beside you when you're seeking his people. Cook that supper dumb."

She shuffled outside and raising the umbrella over her head, careened off through the growling trees.

The sky was now a mass of black-rolling draperies, sweeping toward a single yellow star still showing defiantly above the horizon. The star went out.

MISSISSIPPI

States moved to the stove. Hesitating an instant, he lit a match, and dropped it inside. The wood was wet and did not ignite. He struck another light and began to fan vigorously with his hat. The chips beneath the kindling glowed and burst into flame; Soon the grease on the frying-pan handle was sizzling and falling drop by drop onto the floor.

A light rain pattered upon the roof. The wind rose to a furious gale that rocked the shanty giddily and set the trees above to lashing their huge limbs like mad monks who had doomed themselves to torment. States caught the pan as it slid out wildly from the stove, and bracing himself against the wall, held it over the fire.

The rain beat harder, became a flame-shot deluge which swept through the edges of the window and poured in a myriad silent fountains down the crudely jointed walls. Great yellow drops began to splash rhythmically upon the boy's head. He moved aside and kicked a bucket forward to receive them.

A great sheet of water swished off the streaming wall and splashed onto the flame. The fire dulled and sputtered feebly as though it would go out. He took his hat and fanned until it was once more glowing.

The room filled with an acrid odor as the meat

MISSISSIPPI

in the pan commenced to burn. The boy's face which at the beginning had been calm, impassive, grew tense; his eyes narrowed. There was a deafening clap of thunder; tongues of fire danced along the bough of a giddy swaying oak, then vanished. A moment later a faint sound like sandpaper rasping against wood began at some undefined point near him, accompanied by a low, dismal moaning. The boy blanched; sprang back in terror as the door leading off into the other part of the cabin shot open and a whining shadow hurled itself at his feet. For an instant he stood rigid, then mastering his fright, looked down and saw Shoo Fly drenched and shivering. Quickly he put the dog back into the room from which he had come.

The rain changed to a fierce hail which struck against the metal roof with the noise of a thousand clashing bayonets. The wind screamed up the battered stovepipe like a fiend in agony. The reeling world outside the shanty seemed consumed in mad dancing clouds of malevolent fire. A license plate whistled off the roof and a stream of water began to splatter the dishes set to dry upon the sink. The clock in the corner began to tick noisily again, the cuckoo called a startled hour. The screech owl which seemed to dwell in the eaves flapped its wings and hooted weirdly in answer.

MISSISSIPPI

The wind howled and the lightning lessened its fury. But new malignant flashes and new black scudding masses of cloud appeared on the horizon as though to indicate that the lull was only temporary. The hail became a beating rain once more. The boy stooped to adjust the brace on his leg and took a new grip on the pan.

Suddenly his hand grew taut as somewhere outside the shanty came a steady crunching as of booted feet tramping over the pebbles of the path. Swiftly he turned from the fire and with straining ears listened. Nearer and nearer came the footsteps, steadily, relentlessly.

The owl gave a frightened cry and flapped off into the night. The dog in the other section of the cabin again began a dreary whining.

The footsteps sounded past the window. Through the smoky glass the boy caught sight of a ghostly head and shoulders shrouded in a great, black hood.

His limbs congealed with horror. His heart beat with a feverishness which sent fierce stabs of pain through his breast. The hairs on his hands became rigid wires.

The footsteps ceased. Three raps sounded on the tin outside.

He did not move.

MISSISSIPPI

The knocks sounded again, twice this time, slow, patient. The boy dragged himself forward and reached the door.

Rigidly he put his hand on the knob, then resolutely flung it open. The hooded figure stood before him, motionless.

A flash of lightning revealed its streaming face. It was Captain Lilly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEY stood gazing at each other in silence.

A new fierce gust of wind shrieked over the river. A tree near the shanty swayed gigantically and crashed to the ground. A swirl of leaves and light branches swept past. The boy moved back from the doorway. "Come in and get out of the storm," he said. He struck a match to light the way.

The old man shook the water off his rubber coat and hat and stepped into the streaming cabin.

The boy lit the lamp, moved the pan of meat from the fire, and set a chair before it. "Sit down here and get dry."

The old man gazed at him hesitantly. "Thank you, son," he said.

He hung his hat and coat on the wall of the room where the boy slept. The dog on the other side whined faintly as he came near. The captain glanced around inquiringly. States, who had begun chopping wood to put into the fire, did not hear. The old man took the place to which he had been invited. Taking off his shoes, but without removing his

MISSISSIPPI

drenched socks, he began toasting his feet over the blackening coals.

The boy thrust the new supply of kindling into the grating, and fanned with his cap again until faint wisps of steam were curling up from the socks over it, then set the shoes on a shelf of the stove to dry. "What did you come for?" he demanded gloomily.

The old man's face had changed perhaps more than the boy's since his departure from the steamboat. His once genial wrinkles were deepening into haggard shadows, his cheeks were sunken, his skin was a sickly yellow. But his eyes as he answered the boy were soft with tenderness. "It don't take much guessing, son."

"Something about the boat, I reckon."

The old man nodded. "I come to get you back. I can't do without you no more."

A shifting of the wind rocked the shanty in a new direction and sent the pail of minnows crashing from the shelf. The boy filled it with water again, and began picking up the tiny fish scattered over the floor. "What'd you come out on a night like this for? You'll get pneumonia or something."

"I had to come tonight. 'Cause tomorrow I'm going away."

MISSISSIPPI

"Where you going?"

"Up to Perryville. They're opening some coal mines up Buzzard Fork there, and them same people that had me working back of Pine City last year want me to take the boat up for a while and do some towing."

"Going to be gone long?"

"Don't know just how long. A couple of months or so anyway. Going first thing in the morning. And I don't want to go without you. A couple of other times I pretty near come over for you. Then a while ago we come up to the button factory to deliver some machinery that we got down at Pine City today, and we were laying there when the storm begun. And all the time I kept looking over toward here and saying to myself, 'Captain Lilly, if you don't go over and get that boy tonight, you ain't fit to wash a skunk.' And after a while I just couldn't stand it no more, so I come. I been waiting for a lull in the storm, but it don't seem like there's going to be any. You ain't looking well, son."

States picked up the last of the minnows and dropped some new crumbs of meat into the water. "I'm feeling all right."

"I'm all right too. Except that I'm missing you terrible, son. Nothing on the boat don't seem the

MISSISSIPPI

same. A couple of nights I been wishing I was dead. And when you get to be a old man to be thinking that way . . . well, it don't make you feel so good."

He took off his socks and put his bare feet over the cheery-crackling flames. "Wasn't easy for me to come here, son. I'm a proud man. For fifty years I been running the biggest boat that was ever run out of Beaver Slough. 'Course now I run as a tow-boat, most of the time, so I don't carry many passengers; but just the same I've took some of the finest people there is on my boat, schoolteachers, and doctors and insurance fellows, and a preachers' convention, and once there was a congressman. I didn't bend my head to none of them. But I'm a-bending it tonight, bending it mighty low to come to Shantytown to get you, son."

Gravely States fed a crumb of meat to the toad who had hopped with pompous eagerness to the minnow bucket. "The Shantytown people's my people."

"They were your own people. But like I told you on the boat they ain't your people no more." He put out his hand as the boy passed and gently took his arm. "Come on back with me, son. You and me can have the best times ever was up at Perryville. It's a wonderful place, they says. A salesman that lives

MISSISSIPPI

in it was telling me just yesterday there's so much going on there a fellow wouldn't get no sleep for three or four months if he tried to do it all. Everything's just the best there is. There's three picture shows, he says, and stores where you can get four flavors of ice cream all the year round, and the clothing store he works for has a monkey playing in the window all the time to get customers, and there's a piano-learning place where a fellow's giving lessons all day long right out by the street where you can see him, and I don't know what all. And then on Sunday you can go out to the lunatic asylum, and sometimes you can see some of them crazy people."

States' countenance was lighting with interest. "Doc Laura's brother's there at that asylum, ain't he? The one that started stealing umbrellas and making bows and arrows out of them and running around naked in the woods hunting?"

"Um-huh."

The boy's eyes grew wistful. "I'd sure like to see him cutting up."

"I guess you could. Seems to me like you could. I'd take you up to this here salesman and I guess he could fix it up for you. Looked to me by the tie and the fancy hat he was wearing that he was a pretty big man. . . . 'Course I guess they puts

MISSISSIPPI

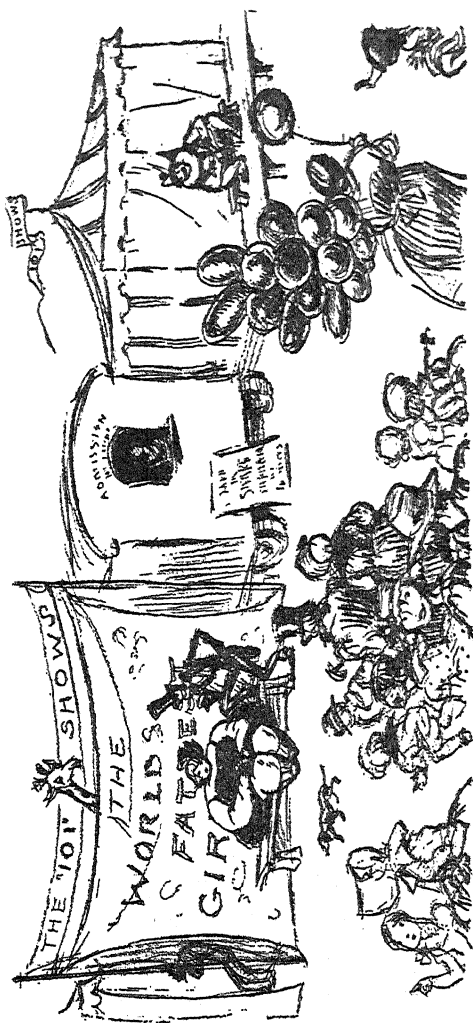
clothes on them when they get inside the asylum."

States' face fell.

The old man went on hastily. "But I guess you wouldn't even have no time to go to the asylum, 'cause they're having the carnival now, the fellow said. Said there's a wild man just growls to himself all day long and stamps up and down his cage and swallows rabbits down whole the way a nigger does bananas. And there's a fellow that writes with his feet, and draws pictures with them too. Draws pictures of hens laying eggs and a man getting chased by a bull and pretty near anything you'd want. He done one, the salesman said, of Moses giving out the ten commandments, that had everybody's eyes pretty near popping out. Done it upside down."

"I seen that fellow," States said excitedly. "He was at the picture show in Pine City. He done the hen and the bull and the Moses, too. But none of 'em was upside down. That there sure is something to see."

"Guess he's practiced a lot and got himself better. And all I'm telling you is just a beginning, according to the way the salesman says. It's what they call the Hundred and One Shows and Carnival. He didn't count all the acts, but he said it looked to



It's what they call The Hundred and One Shows and Carnival.

MISSISSIPPI

him like there was even more than that. You'd like to see it, wouldn't you, States?"

"I sure would." Then he shook his head. "But I ain't going to leave my kinfolk."

The old man's face saddened. "I was sure hoping you'd come with me and see it." He felt the socks steaming on the rusty knob of the stove.

"You ain't got no objection to my sitting here, having a little talk, have you?"

"No, I ain't got no objection."

The old man pattered over in his bare feet to get his pipe from his coat. The dog began whining faintly again as he neared the wall. States heard it this time and paled. The whining ceased. The boy's face grew calm again.

The captain lit the pipe, resumed his place at the fire, and began to puff thoughtfully. "Too bad Buttereye ain't here. He'd sure like to be talking to you too."

"How is Buttereye? He getting along all right?"

"Getting along fine."

"Did you and him get that bet about them flies decided?"

"Just didn't have no luck with that bet at all, somehow. I got four more cages of 'em full . . . after you was gone. . . . They didn't have no food

MISSISSIPPI

for a couple of days, and I was just about figuring they was getting ready to get to work on each other, when a wind come and blowed 'em off the window-sill where I was keeping them into the river. Me and Buttereye's got a new one now, betting how many mosquitoes it takes to make a pound." He reached into his pocket and took out a pill-box. "Got pretty near a hundred in here already. When we have a cigar-box full we'll get it weighed up at the post-office." He gazed at the dried insects lying within, noticed several mosquitoes flying around some vegetables in the sink, and catching them expertly, put them with the others.

They chatted on aimlessly for a few moments. The boy's spirits continued to brighten.

The old man felt his socks and lazily began drawing them onto his feet. "How about a little music, son?" he demanded cheerfully.

The boy took his harmonica from his pocket. "All right. What 'll I play you?"

"Well, guess there ain't nothin' better than 'Cripple Creek' for a stormy night."

"Guess there ain't." He put the instrument to his lips and with his lame foot began to beat out the jaunty rhythm. The old man listened intent a moment, then commenced to sing.

MISSISSIPPI

When the music ceased, both were flushed and beaming.

The old man wiped his sweating forehead and breathed a sigh of deep content. "That's sure music, son. Mighty like old times when you're playing, ain't it?"

"Um-huh."

"We sure had mighty good times on the Morning Glory together, didn't we?"

"We sure did."

"Remember the time that smart-aleck fellow from St. Louis who was studying to be a pilot came on board, when we was tied up for a fog so thick you couldn't see your hand before your face, and he said the fog wasn't nothing, he'd take her down to Pine City perfect if we'd let him? Remember how I said all right and fixed it up with the engineer to keep the paddle going, so he'd think she was moving?"

"I sure do remember. Gosh, can't you just see him twisting the wheel and blowing the whistle and hollering down orders to the engine-room like he was a nigger king or something? And then after he'd kept it up for pretty near a hour the fog blowed away and he seen he was still tied to the Beaver Slough wharf and hadn't moved a inch."

MISSISSIPPI

"I ain't going to forget it till my dying day." He rocked with laughter and began gaily slipping on his shoes. "No, sir. Ain't no place like a steamboat for having fun."

A roll of the shanty caused the cow-bell in the corner to tinkle faintly. The old man turned, saw the bell and the wheel beneath, and with an inquiring glance at the boy, walked toward them. Closely he examined the battered rim studded with clothespins and the sunflower stalks which formed the speaking-tubes beyond it, then gazed round at the boy and smiled gently.

"I guess you ain't forgetting you're a steamboater, are you, son?" he murmured.

The radiance in the boy's cheeks vanished. "I . . . wish I could," he said wretchedly.

The old man moved to the wall to scrutinize the laboriously drawn river charts tacked upon it. As he did so the faint whimpering behind it recommenced.

"That your dog in there I been hearing, son?"

States paled again. "Um-huh. . . . It's a dog."

"Wants to get out, don't he?"

"Um-huh."

"Big dog or a little dog?"

"I guess . . . in between."

The old man shook his head regretfully. "Just

MISSISSIPPI

looks like since you left the Morning Glory I ain't got no luck at all any more. Guess you ain't heard about Shoo Fly being stole?"

States hesitated.

"Some of them niggers working up at that construction camp done it," the captain went on without waiting for his answer. "Took him the night after you went away. I found one of them pay-slips they uses laying out in the barge, so we knowed it was the niggers. I got the sheriff after them, but some had got fired and went down the river, so they must have took him with them. I guess I ain't going to see Shoo Fly no more. I'd sure like to get the fellow that stole him. He'd never steal another dog after I got through with him."

He took out his watch, in whose dial the world's natural wonders still ticked slowly past. "Getting late," he murmured. "Guess I'll have to be going. Seven after eleven according to mine. What time you got?"

The whimpering of the dog continued. The pallor of the boy's cheeks heightened. Nervously he consulted his watch which was a duplicate of the other except for the circling, gay-colored pictures. "I got nine after," he said, and his eyes apprehensively drifted off to the rattling door.

MISSISSIPPI

The whining ceased once more. States' tension relaxed.

"Have you set her any since you been away?"

"Nope."

"That's sure mighty good, ain't it, just two minutes' difference in all that time. Sure shows that them people who told me picture-watches didn't keep good time didn't know what they was talking about. Let me see that one of yours, will you? I'd kind of like to see that Sphinx with the camel standing round it and the Wall of China one again."

The boy put it in his hand.

"You can look at mine while I'm looking at yours," the old man went on, giving his watch to the boy. "Remember how the Vesuvius one was getting kind of faded?"

"Um-huh."

"Well, you look at her particular and you'll get a surprise."

"It is changed, ain't it? Who done it?"

"That fellow who was up at the drugstore last week and sat in the window painting pictures for a quarter. Best painter ever come around here, I'll tell you. That red he put on her is sure enough to scare you."

They exchanged watches again. With his handker-

MISSISSIPPI

chief the old man polished a dusty circle on the dial. "You're coming with me, ain't you, son? You and me's just like these two watches. They was made to be together."

The boy shook his head.

"Well, if you ain't going to come, I guess there ain't no way of making you. But I'm sure going to miss you up at Perryville. I don't know whether I'll go to the asylum or do any of them things without you." He moved to the door and began taking down his hat and coat. The whining of the dog broke out afresh, became frantic as the captain moved near the threshold to take his departure. "Gosh, he wants to get out bad, don't he? I'm sure going to get me another dog."

As he spoke the door shot open. Shoo Fly bolted out and leaped wildly upon him, spattering his clothes with water and covering his shirt with a myriad muddy footprints.

As on the night the boy had gone away, the wrinkles in the old man's yellow face again deepened until they were like great wounds cut by a sword in the head of a wax dummy. Then he took the dog in his arms and slowly, gently stroked its dripping head. "I raised him up like my own boy, Shoo Fly," he said. "And now he gets to be a thief."

MISSISSIPPI

The boy stared at him rigidly a moment, then bleakly hung his head. "I ain't a thief. I didn't steal him. One of the shanty fellows give him to me, that's all. I didn't want to keep him at first. Every time you was at the button factory I took him over to the woods and told him to go back to you. And he wouldn't go."

The old man did not answer, and still holding the dog in his arms, moved slowly to the door.

The boy's lips writhed, his eyes became desperate. Quickly he limped to the threshold and barred the way. "I ain't no thief, I tell you. You got to listen to me. I ain't going to let you go before you listen. I said I wanted a dog and one of the shanty fellows got him for me. And then after I tried to make him go back and he wouldn't I got to feeling he was mine. Tonight a couple of times I was going to tell you he was in there. But I just couldn't, that's all. I ain't got no other friends in Shantytown. And I knowed if I told you you'd take him away."

The old man halted and continued to caress the dog as though unconscious of the other's presence. "Day after day I been looking for you, Shoo Fly. Day after day I been just sick about you, asking everybody I knowed about you, and worrying about how them niggers maybe had sold you to a man that

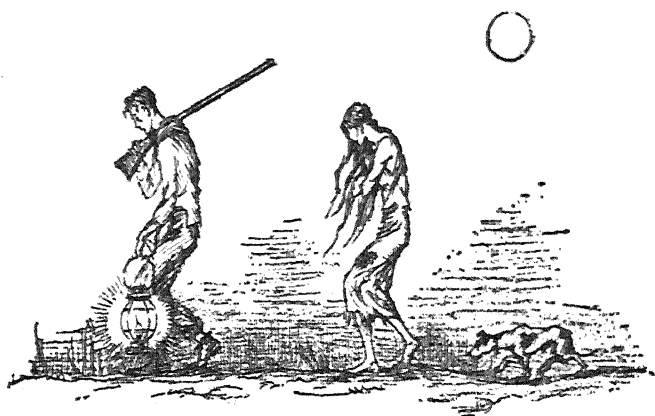
MISSISSIPPI

beat you. Miss Hessie over at the button factory told me a fellow seen a dog like you over here but I didn't believe it. I figured if you was here, he'd sure bring you back to me, even if we wasn't friends no more. But I might have knowed he'd turn out just the same as the others. Stealing himself or letting somebody else do it, it's the same thing. I come here, pretty near begging him on my knees to come back to me. And all the time he was doing this to me. Just being a Shantytown thief. I don't never want to see his face again."

He tucked the dog inside his coat to shield it from the rain and stumbled off into the night.

States closed the door, and limped to his pilot-house. One by one he took the tediously drawn river charts from the wall and slowly thrust them into the stove; one by one he carried the bell, the speaking tubes, and the wheel to the shanty's side and dropped them into the river.

He came upon the pilot's cap which the dog had worn during their fanciful voyages, its leather band white with wiry hairs. He hesitated. Carefully he selected a few of the largest and thrust them into the locket at the back of his watch, then let the cap drop over the rail. It splashed dully into the water.



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE loss of his dog intensified the wretchedness of the boy's life in Shantytown. But full of pity for the old woman and the girl whose poverty-stricken lives he was sharing, he resolved after a few days of bottomless misery that he would no longer add his constant dejection to their difficulties; when either was near by he again began to assume a cheerfulness which, as the days passed, became an excellent counterfeit of his former gaiety. At the same time his relations with Towhead became closer, friendlier. Often in the evening after the derelicts of the day's mussel catch had been cleared away, and the frugal supper eaten, he would sit down at the table and play with her hour after hour

MISSISSIPPI

on the battered parchesi-board rescued from the dump, or occasionally if the weather was clear, let her accompany him on a hunting expedition into the woods.

The struggle with his despondency became difficult again as the Morning Glory came back from her stay at Perryville, and he once more saw the great twists of smoke rolling out the sighing stacks or heard the faint, musical clinking of the engines. He concealed his feelings from the others, however, and was lying in bed a few days after the boat's return, having been wakened by the roll of the shanty as the steamer swept past the window, when to his astonishment, in the room where the two women were sleeping, he heard the sound of suppressed sobbing.

The sobs soon ceased, but he was troubled. Knowing that the voice was too girlish to be the old woman's, he searched Towhead's face curiously when he had dressed and gone into their section of the shanty to wash. But as there was no sign of tears in her eyes, he dismissed what he had heard as the climax of a bad dream, and turning from her, genially surveyed the old woman who was still lying in bed, with a torn piece of mosquito netting drawn over her face.

MISSISSIPPI

"What you got that for, Aunt Vergie?" he demanded. "I ain't seen no mosquitoes round here for a couple of weeks."

"With a yawn the old woman sat up and disentangled the fabric from her hair. "I ain't got it for mosquitoes," she answered. "I got it for the witches. They been riding me till every bone in my body's aching, and I'm just getting mighty tired of it, that's all."

States chuckled. "You always got something funny, ain't you, Aunt Vergie?"

"This here ain't nothing funny. Anybody knows ain't nothing like a mosquito bar to keep witches off you. Sue says it's because they have to go in and out every mesh before they can touch you, and they get so tuckered out doing it they just kind of give up and go home." Sleepily she examined the edges of the netting where several corners had been sewed into little sacks. "Sometimes if you've got these here bags sewed right, they drop down in them and you can catch one. And then all you have to do is to say the three highest names in the Bible to it, and it's got to give you anything you want. But you can't expect no luck with mosquito bar wore out the way this is."

States chuckled again and taking Towhead's

MISSISSIPPI

place at the washstand began to shave a non-existent beard. He finished and was putting on his shirt patterned in green and red diamonds interspersed with occasional yellow horseshoes, when he suddenly caught up the dangling tail of the garment and peered at it intently. In the cloth near the waist were three circular holes about the size of a small button. "Dog-gone, that's the funniest thing I ever seen," he muttered. "Two mornings ago there was just one hole, and yesterday there was two, and now there's three. Cut clean like as if it was a scissors done it too. You sure some of them witches of yours ain't been fooling with my shirt, Aunt Vergie?"

"What'd I be cutting up your shirt for, son? If I was going to touch it, I'd be fixing it, not tearing it to pieces."

"You been doing anything with it, Towhead?"

"'Course she ain't," Aunt Vergie replied quickly. "Moths or something's been getting at it, that's what it is."

"Never heard of moths eating shirts before. Way Miss Goldie explained it to me, they just eat wool."

"Lordy, to hear you talking ain't nobody knows anything excepting Miss Goldie. 'Course they eats shirts. There was a woman I knowed down the

MISSISSIPPI

river told me a lady in town give her a couple of shirts for her old man, and one morning she washed them and put them out on the line and when she come back wasn't nothing left but the rope they was hanging on. Moths ate up every stitch of them."

"Something mighty funny about them holes." He thrust the tail into the trousers and seeing that the wood-box beside the stove was empty, trudged up the river to get a new supply. When he returned, Aunt Vergie was dressed and at the stove, cutting out some soggy biscuits with a cracked tumbler.

Breakfast was soon ready. Towhead and States took seats at the table and began to eat. The boy was bending over to drop a biscuit crumb to the toad, which had hopped onto his shoe, when Towhead suddenly put down the sooty pot from which she was pouring coffee, and burying her head in her hands burst into the bitter sobbing he had heard a little while before.

He gazed at her in alarm. "What's the matter with you, Towhead?" he flashed. "You sick or something?"

She shook her head.

"She ain't sick," Aunt Vergie answered cheerfully for her. "Poor girl's just tired out from all the washing she done yesterday."

MISSISSIPPI

"Oughtn't make her cry, ought it?"

"'Course it ought. Boy don't know nothing about a woman."

The girl dried her tears on her apron and dejectedly poured out the remainder of the coffee. States watched her thoughtfully a moment, then took a piece of chalk from his trousers. "I know something to cheer you up, Towhead."

"Better tell her what it is then, son," Aunt Vergie advised. "Maybe you're going to make her something?"

"Nope. I'll teach her how to write and draw pictures with her feet."

In bewilderment Aunt Vergie let the biscuit she was munching drop to the table. "What you talking about, boy? You going crazy?"

"Ain't going crazy at all. I been laying in bed thinking about it all morning. I seen a fellow doing it at the picture show once and he was making all kinds of money. And if he can, so can other people. I'm going to start practicing today. I'm getting tired of never having a nickel. And like I said I'll teach Towhead, too. Why, if a fellow doing it just by himself could make all the money he did, think of what a fellow and a girl would get if they wrote the same words and pictures together and

MISSISSIPPI

ended up by maybe drawing a big flag." He turned to the girl in boyish enthusiasm. "You want to try it, Towhead?"

She nodded eagerly. He stooped, and setting the chalk between the toes of her bare foot, began guiding it over the floor. A quarter of an hour they spent thus, stopping for occasional sips of coffee or a bite of bread, while the first white line grew into what appeared to be a triangular rock resting on a half-dozen cucumbers.

"Ain't bad at all for the first time you tried it," States pronounced, as the girl's foot came to rest and he surveyed the labor academically. "The eggs is fine and if you'd have put that tail further down, anybody'd know it was a hen. Now I'll show you how to do calling cards, and maybe this afternoon Moses Giving Out the Ten Commandments, upside down. Don't know what we're going to do about the lightning though, 'cause for that you got to have a yellow pencil."

Both bent over the new task. They had been engaged at it for several moments when Aunt Vergie, who had arisen to supervise the pot of corn boiling on the stove, wheeled on them suddenly. "Why don't you and Towhead get married, States?" she flashed.

MISSISSIPPI

The boy did not look up from the pen which he was substituting for the chalk clutched in his toes. "You been saying that a couple of weeks now, Aunt Vergie. I tell you I don't want to marry Towhead."

"What's the matter? Don't you like her?"

"Me and her's friends, that's all. Besides I ain't old enough to get married. Maybe when I get to be a old man and have stomach trouble I'll get married, the way all the pilots does. But I ain't going to do it before."

"How old are you?"

"Turned sixteen."

"And you ain't old enough?" She snorted in indignation. "Look at that sister of your pappy's, Ida May Etty. She got married when she was mighty young, and look what come of that son of hers. Left the shanty-boats and went into politics and got himself made janitor of the courthouse. I seen that congressman that made the speech up at Hanging Dog reach into his pocket when he come up to him and give him a cigar. It was a gold-banded one, too, 'cause it was one of the three I got. Young marriages is always lucky. You get married to Towhead and you'll never be wanting to go back to the steamboat nor never be blue no more. Just

MISSISSIPPI

be happy as them tin monkeys they has dancing in the candy store window Christmas time."

The boy did not reply, but with his foot dipped the pen into an ink bottle and awkwardly began to write his name on a square of paper. The old woman shrugged her shoulders. A moment later, as the tattered wagon umbrella of Nigger Sue swept past the window, she took several ears of corn from the dish steaming before her and carried them to the door in a pie pan. After a brief, cheerful conversation she gave them to the fat negress and returned to her place at the table.

"Dog-gone it, Aunt Vergie, I wish you wouldn't let that nigger woman be coming around here all the time," States said as he finished his name with a flourish and laid the pen on the floor. "She ain't missed a day hardly for the last week."

"Ain't no harm in giving her some vittles, is there?"

"I ain't talking about the vittles. But I just don't like seeing her around. Makes me think of what happened the night she come here to cook that Dumb Supper. I wish you'd catch her in that mosquito bar of yours some morning and drown her."

Aunt Vergie paled. "Lordy, son. Don't you go talking that way. Them people like Sue's got power."

MISSISSIPPI

They finished breakfast. As the two women began to clear away the dishes, States set to work opening the mussels piled in an oily heap on the porch, and searched the shiny interiors for pearls. Towhead soon came to join him. She had been there only a short time, however, when he noticed that her eyes were again filling with tears. Putting down the knife he was holding, he gazed at her anxiously. "You are sick, Towhead," he said. "I ain't never seen you acting like this before. I'm going up to Beaver Slough and get Doc Laura."

"I ain't sick, States. Doctor won't do me no good."

"What you crying for then?"

"Just . . . feel like crying."

States shook his head and picked up the knife again. In a little while the mussels before him had all been opened; piling the broken shells into several buckets, he gazed at the girl thoughtfully and went inside. He returned in a moment with a nickeled watch-case, beneath whose crystal faintly glowed a score of lightning-bugs, and put it in her hand.

"There's a present for you," he said. "Maybe that'll cheer you up better than the foot writing. Found it yesterday and was going to take it down to Pine City and see if I couldn't sell it to a jeweler

MISSISSIPPI

maybe, but I guess it's better for you to have it. Don't look like much now but when night comes them lightning bugs makes it pretty as fireworks. Fellow seen me coming down the road with it last night and he said if you just put a little salt water in it they'd keep going he didn't know how long. Said salt water is the same to a lightning-bug as coal-oil to a lantern."

He hurried off to escape her thanks. Going to a flat-boat moored to the stern, he swung a series of rakes from the sides so that their teeth would scrape the river bottom, and began slowly rowing up and down the stream. At intervals he paused to pull up any mussels caught on the long prongs, and when the shabby boat was leaking under its heavy load, rowed back to the shanty. He continued at this occupation throughout the day, stopping for a while in the afternoon to trundle off several wheelbarrow loads of shells to the button factory, then after a leisurely supper, took his gun and tramped into the woods to hunt. He caught a possum, and was returning, when he saw Nigger Sue coming up the path from Shantytown with her great wagon umbrella raised over her head to ward off the light of the moon. To his astonishment he saw Towhead walking beside her, in one

MISSISSIPPI

hand holding a cigar-box and in the other a smoky lantern.

Her appearance with the old woman, coupled with a remembrance of her sobs of the morning, vigorously aroused his boyish curiosity. Determining to follow them, he retreated into the trees until they were a safe distance ahead and set off down the trail. The negress led the way to the town, skirted it, and reaching the river, began following the course States had taken a few months before in his rescue of Chicken Sam. Down the crumbling levee bordering Big Muddy Bend they plodded until they came to the first of the breaks which had made the dike useless, and descending, plunged into the stagnant desolation of Nigger Skull Swamp.

Trudging on for a few hundred yards, through pungent weeds and along pools of dank, rotting water-lilies, the negress halted at the foot of one of the cypress-crowned ridges rising funereally out of the moonlit waste, and still holding the umbrella over her head, began searching among the shrubs growing on its slope, with each movement of her weighty body emitting a deep, asthmatic grunt. Pulling up several tiny, cloverlike plants, she broke off the leaves, and muttering unintelligibly to herself, thrust them into a tobacco sack filled with a

MISSISSIPPI

gritty powder. She turned to her companion. "Give me them things you cut from his shirt, Towhead," she puffed.

The girl reached inside her dress and withdrew a crumpled envelope.

Sue emptied the three circles of cloth it contained into her fat palm. "Too bad you couldn't get no hairs off him," she panted. "Hairs has got the body lightning better than anything. And if you ain't got that, you ain't got nothing. But just so long as it's been laying close to his skin, there'll be enough in it to get along." She muttered again and placed the bits of colored muslin in the sack with the leaves, then went on: "Now I'm ready for that there toad of yours."

Towhead started to reach out the cigar-box she was still tightly holding in her hand, hesitated, and began a quiet sobbing.

"Now don't you start no goings on, chile," Sue declared sharply. "You and your Aunt Vergie want this here done, don't you?"

The girl nodded tearfully.

"Well, how you expect to get it done when you're a-acting this way? Spirits ain't no different than men. If you want them to do something for you, you got to give them pay. Besides your Aunt

MISSISSIPPI

Vergie told you to give it to me without no fussing. She ain't paying nothing for it nohow. And there's plenty of niggers down at Pine City gives people half a dollar for making things ain't nothing like as hard as this."

Towhead opened the box, and taking out the blinking toad, pressed it against her breast a moment. Then she put it in the old woman's hand.

"You just be quiet a couple of minutes and it'll be all finished," Sue asserted, amiable again as she set the toad on the ground. "Just need three drops of blood from it after it's dead, and with the snake dust and the other things that's in the sack you got a charm that not one of them rich niggers down at Pine City could make you. After that all you have to do when you get home is to tie it to a leg of his bed and you won't ever have to do any more worrying."

She picked up a heavy stone and had raised it over her head, ready to strike, when States burst suddenly from behind the gnarled cypress where he had been hiding. "You drop that stone, Sue!" he commanded.

The negress obeyed in fright. Stiffly she backed away from the hatless apparition halted before her.

"You get on home, now," States ordered coldly.

MISSISSIPPI

Sue's terror faded. Inquiringly she turned to Towhead for guidance. But she found no encouragement in the girl's startled eyes; after a moment's grumbling she thrust the tobacco sack inside her dress and waddled off to the river.

States moved to Towhead. Sternly he looked at the toad which had hopped near the lantern smoking in her hand, then let his gaze rest accusingly on her troubled face.

She twisted the safety pins forming her necklace and turned away. "How you come here, States?" she murmured.

Moodily he shifted the heavy possum slung over his shoulder. "I seen you going out. . . . And I thought you was up to something. . . . Why was you making a spell against me?"

Towhead made no answer.

"I thought you and me was friends. But looks like I ain't got no friends. . . . Why was you doing it?"

Still the girl remained silent. The lantern beside her flared, tiny threads of flame began to jet out the holes in the top. Mechanically she stooped and turned down the wick. "I wasn't making it against you. . . . I was making it to bring you to me."

"What you mean, bring me to you?"

MISSISSIPPI

"So . . . you'd marry me."

The boy's sternness changed to a staring incredulity, incredulity which soon became embarrassment. Sheepishly he pulled a blade of grass and poked at a great brown beetle trying to crawl up his leg. "That's just silly talking now. Just awful silly. If I hadn't knowed that you hadn't gone to bed yet, I guess I'd be thinking you was walking in your sleep or something. You ought to be ashamed of yourself talking that way. You ain't old enough to get married. No more than I am. You ain't fifteen yet. Aunt Vergie's sure been putting things in your head." He thrust his hands into his pockets and awkwardly, uneasily, began digging holes in the soft ground with the tip of his shoe. "It's all nigger foolishness about them spells, anyway. If it wasn't, a nigger could get a king to come to him and bring him all his money. I been trying to teach you about things like that, but it looks like it don't do no good. . . . I declare you ought to be ashamed of yourself for being so ignorant even if you ain't ashamed for wanting to get married when you ain't fifteen yet. And you was going to kill Professor Jacks, too."

"You know I didn't want to kill him." She gazed down at the solemn creature tenderly. "But Sue said I had to, if I was to get you."

MISSISSIPPI

He whistled in uncomprehension, and with his foot turned on its back the beetle once more doggedly waddling toward his shoe. "Never heard such foolish talking in all my life. I ain't nobody. I don't own no bank or nothing. I'm just a shanty-man same as you. What you want to marry me for?"

"'Cause . . . I love you."

States shook his head hopelessly. "Just ought to be ashamed of yourself," he muttered.

The beetle, recovering its feet, stumbled over to Towhead and began floundering against Professor Jacks, investigating him curiously with its long, shiny feelers. The toad eyed it indignantly and retreated onto the girl's foot. She bent over and picking him up once more, gently began to scratch his horny head.

"Ever since the first day you come here I guess I been loving you. Things was mighty nice in the afternoon, when you and me went out to the dump together, but then when it was night and you talked to me and give me that candidate's button, something just come over me. Something like in winter when you're freezing with the cold on the shanties and you go to town and Judge Ash's wife sees you and calls you into her kitchen and you sit down by a big stove just so full of coal it's red.

MISSISSIPPI

“And then after all them days when you was telling stories, and playing the harmonica and teaching me parchesi, it got so that whenever I was away from you and heard you going around in your room or talking, I felt myself drawing to you. Just the same way them tin ducks they had in the drug-store window that time was drawed to that piece of iron the fellow put in the basin where they was floating. I ain’t never felt that way about anything before. Last week I was out in the cemetery a couple of days after Pres Capps’ brother died, and I seen his dog just sitting and sitting by his new-dug grave. And I got to thinking about dying and things like that, and how if you was buried I just wouldn’t ask no more than to be a dog so I could sit there and mourn over you till I was dead, too. I thought at first when you give me the button and things that maybe you was feeling the same way about me. But then that night when you put Shoo Fly’s hair in your locket and didn’t ask for none of mine, I knowed it wasn’t so.”

The lantern flared again and began to scorch her sleeve. She did not notice. “I wouldn’t have done nothing about it. I knowed you wasn’t a shanty-boater, even if you was born one, and that if you was going to get a wife it’d be a schoolteacher or

MISSISSIPPI

somebody like that. Wouldn't be poor white trash like me. But then Aunt Vergie begun talking more and more about how you'd never get satisfied or happy being a shanty-boater till you got married to some shanty girl. And I seen you going around miserable all the time when you thought we wasn't watching you. And I thought maybe if I did marry you you wouldn't be miserable no more."

A smell of scorching cloth arose from her dress. Absently she gazed down at the flaring lantern and drawing her sleeve away, went on dreamily, "One night when we was laying in bed, I told Aunt Vergie. She said marrying you would be the best thing that could happen to you, but that I'd never get you natural and she'd get Sue to make a spell. Just broke my heart pretty near when Sue said she'd have to kill Professor Jacks. But I knowed it says in the Bible you can't get nothing without sacrifice. And I wanted my hair . . . to be there in the locket . . . with your dog's."

As she spoke the boy's embarrassment gradually gave way to a return of his gloomy sternness. Taking the lantern, he shifted the possum to a more secure position on his shoulder and moodily started with the girl down the path. "You knowed I didn't want to get married," he muttered. "I told you I

MISSISSIPPI

don't know how many times. And just the same you and your Aunt Vergie was going to try to make me do it. Behind my back. Looks like everywhere I go people starts working tricks on me. First it was Captain Lilly and now it's you. Them spells is all foolishness like I told you. But you tried to put one on me and that makes it just the same as if you did. When I come here I thought you and me was going to be friends, just as happy as a couple of squirrels. I done everything I could for you, hunting for you, and learning you to read and teaching you foot-writing and everything, and then first chance you get you do something to me."

He helped her over a giant fallen log beneath which an unseen snake rattled an ominous warning, and continued somberly: "Guess I would have got married the way I told you that the pilots do, when I got to be a old man and had stomach trouble. And I guess when I seen you didn't have nobody to open your mussel-shells for you or play music for you when you was washing up the dishes, I'd have married you. But I don't think I'll ever get a wife now, seeing what I seen of women already. And if I do, it sure ain't going to be you. Just makes me feel like wanting to go away from you for good."

Towhead's lips trembled. "Where'd you be going?"

MISSISSIPPI

"Down to Pine City first and see if I could find out where that carnival is that was playing up at Perryville. Then I'd go there and ask the fellow that does the foot-writing to give me a job helping him. Even if he wouldn't let me do the writing at first, if it's the same fellow I seen at the picture show, I could keep his pencils sharp and sell the postcards for him and hold the people he's tattooing. I got a mighty good mind to go off in the morning and try it."

"You're saying you'd be going to Pine City. But I guess you'd really be going to a steamboat somewhere, wouldn't you? I can tell by the way you been acting all the time you've been in Shantytown you've just kind of been wanting a chance to get away."

They gained the river bank, and mounting the levee, set off on the long walk to Shantytown. States, absorbed in moody reflection, mechanically raised the lantern as they neared the great mud-holes perforating the rotting bank. Towhead trailed a few feet behind, clutching the frog and watching the flickering figure before her with shamed, abject eyes.

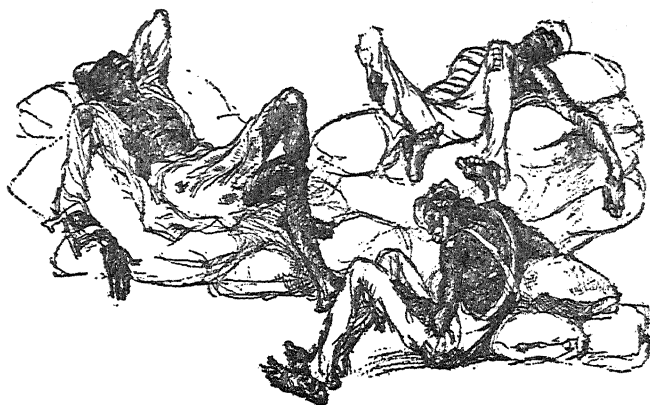
Across the dump they stumbled and reached the path to Shantytown. The boy halted, looked for a moment at the lights of the shanties glowing in a

MISSISSIPPI

misty crescent through the trees, then glanced at the desolate face of the girl behind him. Uneasily he tugged at the strap of his rifle, which had begun to chafe his breast.

"Guess I won't go down to Pine City," he muttered. "The shanty people's my own people and I'll stay as long as I can. Only when things happen like what happened tonight, don't look like it's going to be very long. But I ain't going to live with you and your Aunt Vergie no more. I'm going to start building my own shanty tomorrow."

Dolefully he gazed at his gayly patterned shirt and fingered the three smooth holes near his belt. "Cut right through two of the horseshoes," he murmured. "And there's only twenty-seven horseshoes on all of her. Looks to me like even if you was doing me wrong . . . you could have took the diamonds."



CHAPTER NINE

ARISING in the morning, he at once set about looking for a site on which to erect his new home, and chose a spot at the edge of the shallow bay in which the shanties were lying. Here, directly on the narrow stream, he could see everything which swept up and down its yellow surface. The location had the disadvantage that his nearest neighbor was White Johnny, whose shanty crowned with a broken pitcher for a chimney-pot lay hidden in a clump of trees a short distance up the shore. He determined, however, that he would not let the other's enmity deprive him of a situation which otherwise greatly pleased him. Immediately limping off to the dump to search for boards, he began to

MISSISSIPPI

build at once and continued to work whenever he could spare a few hours from his tasks in Aunt Vergie's shanty.

Occasionally as he plied his hammer or ax, he saw negroes row up to White Johnny's cabin and return down the stream with two or three liquor jugs set in the bow. The boats came oftener, he noticed, when he chanced to work at night and he recognized some of the passengers as rousters from the Morning Glory who were paying for the liquor with sacks of flour or boxes of canned goods which he knew had been stolen from the vessel's stores. He chewed his lips and said nothing, however—a course he followed a little while later when the wharfboat of the steamer was broken into and he caught sight of the loot piled in White Johnny's cabin.

White Johnny's first raid, becoming a second, brought a sudden swoop of the sheriff which momentarily checked the shantyman's activities. But soon the furtive rowboats with their black oarsmen and often purloined cargoes were stealing up the stream as before.

States' new dwelling gradually took definite form; from the hull arose a skeleton of roof and walls. Often as the boy worked, Towhead came over to

MISSISSIPPI

join him. For a time, remembering the incident of the swamp, States had treated her with aloofness mingled with distrust; now, forgiven, she would lie contentedly inside the pine-fragrant structure, laboriously spelling out the words beneath the pictures in his prized mail-order catalogue, or listening to him expound some youthful philosophy as he calked the seams in the walls.

He always ceased his discourses, however, when the rhythmic coughing of the Morning Glory echoed over the river, and going to the window, stoically watched until it had steamed out of sight over the waves. In a brief glimpse of the captain the morning after the steamer's return from Perryville he had noticed that the haggardness manifest in the old man's countenance on his visit to Shantytown had accentuated in the three months of his absence, until he appeared to be suffering from a severe illness. In the days that followed, as the boy caught sight of him tramping the deck or standing on the wharf of the button factory, he saw that the change continued to intensify. The wrinkled but once genial face became a sickly yellow, two black patches showed under his once twinkling eyes, the once immaculate crescent mustaches were now ragged and brown with tobacco stains. And not

MISSISSIPPI

only his appearance, but his manner, even his character, seemed to be gradually altering. When he appeared to call out an order to the mate or pilot, instead of his habitual good humor, there was now only irritability and often harshness.

The change was forcibly called to the boy's attention one afternoon by a chance meeting with Buttereye in the hardware store where he had come to buy a few pennies' worth of nails.

"He just ain't the same man, States," the pilot said, as from his seat at a rusty stove he overwhelmed with a well-directed shot of tobacco juice a thousand-legger crawling up through a crack in the floor. "He was bad enough when he was up at Perryville, cranky all the time. But now since he's been back here, what with all this stealing going on and all his niggers getting so drunk we got to get new ones every week, he's just about going crazy. He won't even let nobody play music now when he's around, and when a fellow's that way, it's a bad sign."

"Sure is a bad sign," put in an overalled farmer sitting near him. "Look at that cousin of Miss Goldie's, now, lived up at Granny Run. He used to be just powerful fond of music, the way Captain Lilly was. Bought himself a accordion and used to



*A chance meeting in the
hardware store.*

MISSISSIPPI

play it all the time. Then one day all of a sudden he stopped, saying he'd got sick of hearing it rattle. And before a year was up he'd killed a man and was hung. I tell you I'm looking out for a man don't like no music played around him."

"Looks like something's just kind of tore up inside him, he's missing you so bad, States," Butter-eye went on, heedless of the interruption. "Muttering about you all the time. Talking in his sleep, too, and that's something he ain't done since he lost his baby. He's getting just the way he was then, seems to me. Don't know what he's doing half the time. One minute saying how he ought to do something desperate to get you away from the shanty people and the next talking like it's you that's causing all the stealing and getting his niggers drunk and everything, just to spite him. He's getting to talk that way more and more. Soured against you."

"Seems how somebody told him they seen you standing mighty suspicious down by the wharf the night the breaking-in was done, and another fellow that works up at the button factory said he seen you helping White Johnny hand out whisky to the niggers. 'Course I know that ain't so. But when a man gets the way he is, it don't do no good arguing. Last week a couple of logs come down

MISSISSIPPI

with the high water and got tangled up in the fantail and just 'cause it happened when he was passing below Shanty Bend he said you let them loose to bust up the paddle wheel. . . . Ain't but one thing I know that'll get him well and get him well quick. And that's for you to come back to the boat."

The boy took the bag of nails from the proprietor and shook his head. "I'm mighty sorry if he ain't feeling well. Don't like to see anybody sick. But me and him are through. He said he don't want me back anyway. . . . How'd you come out with that bet about the mosquitoes?"

"Looks like we can't never get no bets decided. Before we got a half a cigar-boxful we both got bit up so bad we had to stop. . . . I tell you, son, I'm hoping you'll come back. 'Cause if you don't I'm getting mighty afraid something's going to happen. Something mighty bad."

States shook his head gravely again and limped outside.

A few days later the shanty was completed, and he had installed his few possessions in it, when a heavy rain brought a sudden rise that almost swept the structure down the river as he slept. Surveying the slightly damaged hull by daylight, he decided

MISSISSIPPI

he would prevent a repetition of the occurrence by building a small breakwater, which would at the same time create a stretch of currentless water where mussels could thrive abundantly and afford him an excellent pier from which he could fish. He lost no time putting his plan into execution, and was working one afternoon with an ax, driving down one of the piles he was building out in a double row from the shore, when he saw the Morning Glory come steaming up the river. As usual he turned to watch her. To his astonishment the vessel headed directly to the spot where he was laboring and dug its blunt nose into the muddy bank a few feet away.

An instant later Captain Lilly came out of the pilot-house and moved to the rail. His eyes were feverish, glaring. "What you putting them piles there for?" he demanded harshly. The unexpected bitterness of his tone brought a quick flush of anger to the boy's face. Then his color became normal again; with the ax he began coolly nicking the bark of the pile on which he stood.

"Call it a breakwater, I guess," he said. His voice was calm, dispassionate. "Or a pier, maybe. It's to keep the shanty from washing down and make it easy for mussel-fishing."

MISSISSIPPI

"Well, whatever it is you call it, you got to get it out the river."

A new haze of scarlet swept over the boy's cheeks. He was about to make a passionate reply, when Shoo Fly appeared on the deck at the captain's side and began a joyful barking. States quivered and turned away his head. "You're going crazy," he muttered. "Just plain crazy. Why do you figure I got to take it out?"

The old man reached down to pull back the dog, who was thrusting his head in and out the railing and barking frantically as though trying to make up his mind to leap to the boy below. "You're damming up the river, that's what you're doing. It's throwing all the water to the other side and making a sand bar down at the bend. I got stuck there twice, and the second time pretty near busted up my paddle getting out. I ain't going to stand it no more."

"She can't be making a bar. These piles ain't been here more than a couple of weeks. Things goes mighty quick in this river but not that quick. . . . Where's she making it?"

"Over there by them cottonwoods." Captain Lilly pointed to a group of trees a hundred feet down the shore.

MISSISSIPPI

States watched somberly as the dog ceased his futile attempts at attracting the boy's attention to point a fly buzzing over the deck. "If you keep on talking that way much longer they'll be getting out lunatic papers for you. That bar's been there ever since I can remember. You used to get stuck on it every time you had a heavy load or the water was a little bit low."

"Ain't so." The dog came over to the old man to claim his reward. The captain thrust him away irritably. "I don't believe it's a breakwater at all you're making. You're putting it there just to spite me. Along with the other things you and your shanty people are doing. . . . And I'm telling you again you're going to take it out."

"And I'm telling you I ain't going to." States lifted his ax and resumed his interrupted labor. "If it was bottling up the river I'd pull it out mighty quick. I don't want to block up the river no more than you. And maybe I'd have done it anyway if you had come over and asked me polite. But when you talk to me as if I was just about the lowest trash there is, I ain't going to do anything for you. I don't want to fight you. You and me was friends for a long time. And we had the same dog. I ain't going to start fighting you, even if you try to make

MISSISSIPPI

me to. You're a old man and you're sick maybe and you don't know what you're doing. But just the same I ain't going to take no orders from you. I got as much right in the river as you."

The old man's horny eyebrows stiffened. He walked to the great bell shining before the pilot-house and put his hand on the cord. "For the last time I'm asking you," he grunted. "Are you going to take it out?"

"Nope."

"All right. You'll see. You'll wish you had." He pulled the rope. The bell clanged brazenly. The boat backed wheezily into the river. As the distance between the two vessels increased the dog again began dashing up and down the rail, barking excitedly at the disappearing figure on the shore.

States gazed after him sadly. "You and me's mighty far apart now, Shoo Fly," he murmured. "And looks like all the time we're getting further and further."

He was vividly reminded of the incident not long after, when he found a small pearl in a mussel and on taking it to the barber shop in the hope of selling it to one of the habitués, again met Buttereye, this time soapily stretched out under the razor of the violent-scented Mr. Capps.

MISSISSIPPI

"I'm mighty glad you come in, States," the pilot called across the room, as he pulled at the hairy apron enveloping him and sat up to peer at the jewel, which was passing from hand to hand of the three men sitting along the wall. "I've been wanting to talk to you. Fact is, I was thinking about coming over to your place to see you." He paused as he saw Doc Boaz, the dentist, take the boy's arm and lean over to whisper in his ear. "Don't you let him get that pearl from you for less than fifty cents, States," he added quickly. "He's got plenty of money today. I seen Ruby Corkell down from Caney Corners this morning, and both his jaws was swelled out like they had sofa cushions inside them. There was four teeth come out of him, I'll bet, anyway. Five or six maybe."

States shook his head as the dentist drew away. "I'd rather keep it myself than sell it for less than fifty," he said, and turning to Buttereye went on: "Why was you wanting to see me?"

"To tell you you better get them piles out the river. Captain's getting worse and worse since I seen you. Three or four times last week when I was at the wheel and there wasn't nobody else in the pilot-house, I happened to pass by and heard him talking and arguing with the Lord about you,

MISSISSIPPI

just as if He was sitting on one of them chairs behind him. I tell you he's getting me scared. I thought he was going to pretty near kill one of the niggers last Saturday. Caught him stealing a whole sack of coffee to take up to Shantytown and trade for whisky. I don't know what he'd have done to the nigger if I hadn't stopped him. His face got like that Pine City fellow's up at the drug-store that night when he was doing some tricks with a billiard ball and it stuck in his throat. And he gets that way every time we get stuck a little on that bar down by the cottonwoods he says your piles are making. And sometimes he gets that way just when he sees them."

"The piles ain't making that bar. That bar's been there long as I can remember."

"'Course it has. We're just getting stuck on it the way we always do when the river's kind of low like it is now. But he's got himself believing the piles are making it and so it's the same as if they really was. Like I told you, he's got it figured out how you're the cause of everything that's happening to him. If it wouldn't be the piles, it'd be something else. I don't know what he's figuring on doing to you if you don't get them out, specially if we keep on getting stuck down there the way we been

MISSISSIPPI

doing last week or so. But he's figuring on something, that's sure. What you say, son? You going to take them out for me?"

States shook his head. "I'd take them out for you, but not for him after the way he talked to me. If he'd have asked me polite, I'd have done it right away. But I ain't going to take no orders from nobody. He don't own the river."

"I'd sure keep out of his way then," timidly put in Judge Stubbs, a nervous little rabbit of a man with a towering stiff collar, whose points thrust painfully into the sides of his shrunken Adam's apple. "The way Buttereye is telling it looks to me like the captain's going clean out of his mind."

"One sure way of testing that," asserted Zep Wethers, as he dropped some itch powder down the back of the darky shining his shoes.

"How do you figure?" demanded Mr. Capps, looking up interestedly.

"Electricity," Zep replied tersely. "Buttereye can try it if he gets a chance. An electrician that was changing the lights in the railroad station when I was in St. Louis told me about it. Said a natural man couldn't stand over a couple of hundred volts without dying, but if a fellow is crazy you can send twenty thousand volts through him without doing no more than just making him laugh."

MISSISSIPPI

"Well, whatever it is, if I was States I'd get them piles out," declared the barber. "Or if I didn't, like judge says, I'd sure keep out of his way. And more than that I'd get out of Shantytown. Beaver Slough folks is going to do some cleaning up there one of these days and when they do I wouldn't want to be around. You know what it was last time a few years ago, when we run them out of the county. Mighty close to some lynching then."

Gravely the boy watched the pearl twirling in the dentist's fingers. "I ain't going to run from nobody. . . . Will you give me a half-dollar for it, Doc?"

"Can't do it, States. I ain't got it." He counted the change in his frayed pocket. "Nope, I told you. You see for yourself. Forty's the best I can do."

"How about Buttereye's saying that he seen Ruby Corkell?"

The dentist spat dejectedly into a cracked cuspidor. "Just wasted my time when he come, that's all. Spent a half-hour looking at him and he just let me pull one tooth." He meditated a moment. "I got an idea. Give you forty and the tooth I pulled from the midget that was playing at the picture show last year. You seen it. The one with the four roots that I got in the glass case by the door."

"All right. It's a trade."

MISSISSIPPI

He took the money, and going to the candy store a few doors away bought some colored postcards and two rolls of orange and purple crêpe paper, which he decided would be useful in relieving the shanty's barrenness. A few days later he mounted the cards on pieces of pasteboard. He was tacking them onto the walls while Towhead, come over to assist in the decoration, cut the crêpe paper into wide scallops to hang from the shelves of a battered kitchen cabinet, when he concluded that the pictures would not be satisfactory until they had frames. Giving Towhead specific instructions as to the work to be carried out in his absence, he set off up the low ridge directly in back of Shantytown where there were a few birch trees whose bark would admirably answer his needs.

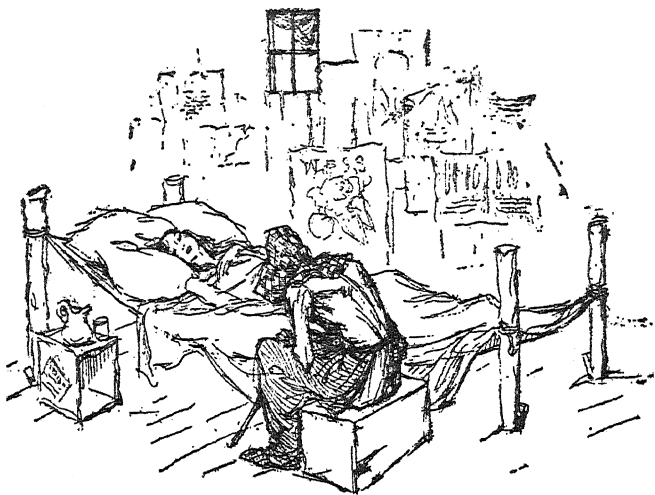
He was on its slope, carefully peeling off long strips of the smooth fiber, when he saw the Morning Glory heading up the stream. Smokily she proceeded up the narrow channel, then approaching the grove of cottonwoods near the boy's shanty, suddenly slackened her speed and snorted to a halt. A moment after he saw the captain bound upon the deck from below and heard his shouted, furious commands. A hoarse, troubled coughing issued from out the sooty stacks; the paddle commenced a

MISSISSIPPI

desperate churning. The vessel did not stir. More angry cries followed, more frantic whirring of the paddles. A burlaped negro scrambled to shore and making a heavy rope fast to a tree, darted back to join a half-dozen of his companions turning the handles of a brass capstan. The rope grew taut. The vessel trembled, crawled forward a few feet, jerked to a halt again as the rope parted. A new line quickly took its place; other rousters came to join those straining at the handles. The boat hesitated as she felt the new pressure, gave a violent bound, and was again in deep water.

A new shout came from the captain. The line was snatched from the tree, the rousters at the bow vanished. The old man sped back to the pilot-house. Up the stream the boat chugged, gingerly, as though she were a great, splashing animal made cautious by the accident, then as she neared the piles the boy had sunk into the water, whipped round and came charging wildly at the shanty.

Hypnotically States saw the tin roof fly up in a great, flashing arc and the yellow walls crumple as the heavy prow cut savagely into the hull. An instant later the shattered craft quivered and turned slowly on its side. The boy swept his hand across his reeling eyes and started racing down the hill.



CHAPTER TEN

HE had lost sight of Shantytown as he descended through the trees. Now as he reached the foot of the hill he saw it again, saw White Johnny, Buffalo, and Little Greasy carrying a limp blue-aproned figure up the shore. He sped on faster, and caught up with Buffalo, who, the last of the solemn-plodding trio, was holding the girl's feet. "She dead?" he gasped.

Buffalo, whose clothes were dripping as though he had just emerged from the water, swept the hook which served as his fingers across his mud-splotched face. "She's still breathing. Andy's gone to get Doc Claymore."

MISSISSIPPI

States caught sight of a wide red stain near the shoulder of the girl's water-soaked dress and shivered. One of her arms swung lifelessly below her and bumped over the pebbles with each uneven footstep of the three silent marchers, the fingers still clutching a dripping square of orange tissue paper. He laid the hand on her breast.

"Doc Claymore ain't no real doctor," he panted. "I'll go to Beaver Slough and get Doc Laura."

With the hook Buffalo scraped out thick layers of mud under his enormous eyes. "Don't start arguing, son. Ain't no time for it. She'd be dead before you got there."

They neared Aunt Vergie's shanty. The old woman came hobbling stiffly forward. Dropping to her knees beside the girl, she caught the lifeless hands and kissed them passionately again and again, then arose and followed the men into the shabby dwelling. Sitting down in a chair, she began rocking back and forth, moaning softly, while her wooden leg, shifting with her swaying body, beat out a dull, monotonous tattoo upon the floor.

The men laid the girl upon her cot, then awkwardly, sheepishly, like blundering children awaiting punishment, took seats on the bed opposite.

They had been sitting there in silence a moment

MISSISSIPPI

when Dr. Claymore entered. He was a runty little man, almost a dwarf, with short spindly legs and arms, and a conical tumor rising from his cheek, which gave him the appearance of a squirrel chewing an enormous nut. "Howdy, folks," he called cheerfully, and hurrying over to the cot where the girl lay, began examining her wounds. "Ain't bleeding much," he announced academically. "Must be something stuck up there stopping it. I'll have to do what they call microbe it. First thing when a fellow got shot or anything in the penitentiary they always used to microbe him. When a fellow can get on to the microbing he can know what he's doing."

Taking a rusty implement which had once been a crochet needle out of the battered shoe-box which served as his instrument case, he began to probe the injuries. "Yep. Is something there. Four or five pieces of something feels to me like glass. Must have come from the window." He motioned Buffalo to his side. "You was cut by a beer bottle once pretty bad, Buffalo. You ought to know what glass feels like. You feel it and see if you don't think it's glass."

Gingerly Buffalo held the probe in his enormous fingers an instant, then nodded. "Sure feels like glass."

MISSISSIPPI

"Guess it's bound to be glass. That shows what you learn by microbing. Looks to me it's mighty close to her lung, too. Bad place. Rather drink pisen than get cut near the lung. Can't tell if she's going to live or if she ain't." He gazed at the shoe-box thoughtfully. "First thing to do, anyway, is to get it out. I'll have to go over to my shanty and get her some of this here medicine they call color form."

"That's what they uses to put people to sleep with, ain't it?" inquired Little Greasy.

"That's right."

"What you need to give it to her for then if she's asleep already?"

"They always give it to 'em. There's been millions of operations and ain't never been one done right without it." He turned on the other sharply. "Look here, was it you or me studied doctoring?"

He bustled out the door. The moaning of the old woman continued. States moved to the bed, and gazed at the pallid girl stretched out upon it. The bit of orange paper in her fingers dropped to the floor. He picked it up and slowly laid it on the cot beside her. "It's account of me she's laying that way, Aunt Vergie," he said. "She was there helping me to get the shanty fixed up pretty."

A gaunt woman followed by a slinking, ghostly

MISSISSIPPI

ribbed dog appeared in the doorway. "I done called the Holiness Folks," she announced shrilly.

One by one the shanty-boaters drifted in as they had on the night of the boy's arrival, and squeezed into seats on the bed, the boxes, the floor.

Preaching Daniel stood up and looked somberly about the room. The murmur of voices ceased. The mother of a whimpering baby drew out a crust of corn bread and put it in the child's mouth to stifle its cries. Solemnly Daniel moved to the side of the bed where the girl lay, and facing the fantastic circle about him, stood motionless a moment, only his gray lips moving as though uttering a prayer. Then he chanted, slowly, dismally: "What is this that I can see with icy hands taking hold of me?"

From the women arose the wailing answer: "I am Death and none can't tell. I open doors to Heaven and Hell. I open doors to Heaven and Hell."

And then together came the chorus: "O Death! O Death! O Death! Please spare me over till another year! O Death! O Death! O Death! Please spare me over till another year!"

Dr. Claymore entered carrying a beer bottle holding a colorless liquid and began making his preparations. Daniel stepped mechanically aside and

MISSISSIPPI

went on with his doleful singing. "I'll fix your feet so you can't walk. I'll lock your jaws so you can't talk. I'll close your eyes so you can't see. This very hour come and go with me."

Then the despairing chorus came from the others once more: "O Death! O Death! O Death! Please spare me over till another year!"

The doctor opened the beer bottle. White Johnny and Buffalo, who like States were not singing, came forward to watch.

"That the color form, Doc?" Buffalo demanded, leaning over and sniffing with his great oxlike nose.

The doctor reached into his shoe-box and drew out a dilapidated towel. "Yep."

"Got a mighty bad smell, ain't it?" He thrust his heavy finger into the bottle until the tip touched the liquid, then withdrew it and brought it experimentally to his tongue.

Angrily the doctor snatched the bottle away. Placing a small tin bucket at the girl's head, he poured the drug into it, and covering it with the towel turned the girl so that her face lay directly over the top. There he held her and began to count, his words sharply punctuating the wailing of the choristers.

The pungent fumes began to permeate the

MISSISSIPPI

crowded room. At the count of ten he ceased, returned the girl to her original position, and began searching again in his shoe-box. Little Greasy yawned sleepily. A moment later White Johnny followed his example. Casting a suspicious glance at the bucket, he took out his bottle of vanilla and sniffed greedily.

Little Greasy hastened to open the window. "That there color form's getting away on you, ain't it, doc?" he asked.

The physician turned indignantly again. "Fellow'd think everybody here had studied doctoring," he muttered. Slowly he poured the liquid back into the bottle, then found his instrument and set to work.

The chanting ceased. One by one the visitors departed until only Hunk-o'-Bread Andy and the three who had entered with Towhead were left. Andy reached into the first of his three layers of coats and withdrawing a crust chewed it avidly. He moved to the boy still standing rigidly at the head of the bed and pulled at his sleeve.

"White Johnny was right, States," he said in his wavering voice. "He wanted to burn up Captain Lilly's boat and you wouldn't let him. Now the captain's done busted up yours instead. I seen him bust

MISSISSIPPI

it too. Standing in the trees right by it. My, oh my, that was something to see. Little pieces of glass shot up in the air like the sparks that comes off an anvil, and them postcards of yours flied out like turkey feathers. I got one of them that blowed up on the bank." He displayed the picture of a garishly colored flower basket from whose handle ran the tinselled legend "Many Happy Returns of the Day."

States made no answer.

A little while later the doctor laid three fragments of glass on the shoe-box lid, and wrapping them carefully in scraps of newspaper, thrust them into his pocket.

"What's you going to do with them?" Little Greasy demanded.

"Save 'em, of course. What you think I'm going to do with 'em? Do a lot of things with glass that come out of a girl. If you scratch a fellow that's got epilepsy with 'em he'll get out of his fit right away. And a fellow I knowed in Pine City said if you could get a long piece like one of these I took out it was better than a peach twig for finding water."

He turned to the old woman crooning in the corner. "You better have one of them, Aunt Vergie. You're entitled to it. She's your gal." Then he added, as the old woman reached out a withered hand and

MISSISSIPPI

took it mechanically: "Guess Towhead's going to live. Can't tell till the color form wears off, 'cause there's been cases where it kept them alive three and four days after they were really dead. Anyway, looks to me like she's going to be sick a long time. Like I told you I'd rather drink pisen than get cut near the lung."

He packed up his paraphernalia and departed. The others soon shambled out after him. States moved to the bed and sitting down beside it took the girl's hand. Until dusk he sat there, motionless, while Aunt Vergie's moaning became a low stifled sobbing. Blackness enveloped the shanty. He arose and lit the dingy lamp.

The sobs of the old woman ceased. Hobbling across the room, she gazed at the outstretched form a moment, then dipping a corner of her dress into a pan of water, began washing the thin, mud-stained face. She sat down beside the boy.

The lamp began to smoke as a night breeze swept over the river. He walked to it and lowered the flame. "It's 'cause of me she got hurt, Aunt Vergie," he said. "And it's 'cause of me if she dies."

"Lord ain't goin' to let her die. Lord can't let her die."

Silence again fell upon the cabin. A great yellow

MISSISSIPPI

moth drifted in with the wind, fluttered about the light, then vanished. A bat circled through the door and struck noisily against the tin pipe over the stove. The wind died. A mist began to touch the shore with ghostly, wavering fingers. The old woman fell asleep.

Towhead stirred uneasily. Her eyes opened and turned feebly in the direction of the lamp. They remained fixed on it a moment, blinking, uncomprehending, then wonderingly fell to her hand still clasped in States' fingers. Her face lighted faintly. A trace of a smile touched her lips. "I'm glad you're a-sitting there, States," she said.

"Yesm'm."

"Something's happened to me, ain't it?"

"Yesm'm. The Morning Glory hit into the shanty when you was in it."

"I knowed there was something. Been kind of hearing something like a lot of cow-bells ringing far off down the valley. But I couldn't see no cows, so I knowed it wasn't right."

"Yesm'm."

"Get me a drink, will you, States? My chest's a-burning. Kind of as if there's pepper in it."

Quickly he brought a tin dipper and held it to her lips. He resumed his seat beside her.

MISSISSIPPI

"Can I do anything else for you?" he asked, after a long silence.

"Just happy having you sitting there holding my hand. Worth getting hurt every day for that." A sharp paroxysm of pain contracted her face, a tiny red line appeared at the corner of her mouth. She pressed the cloth which served as her handkerchief tightly against her lips. When she removed it she was again smiling. "Guess maybe there is something else you could do for me. . . . But I guess you wouldn't want to do it."

"Tell me what it is."

"To put some of my hair in the locket with your dog's. I don't mean for good. Wouldn't ask you that. . . . But just while my chest is hurting so bad."

He took a pair of scissors and delicately cutting off a few wisps of her hair placed them carefully under the glass.

Her wan face became radiant.

The old woman began to waken. She rubbed the wrinkles of her forehead sleepily. "How you feeling, honey?"

The girl pressed the cloth against her lips again. "Getting better all the time, Aunt Vergie."

"Lord ain't going to let you die, honey. Lord

MISSISSIPPI

can't let you die." Gently she unwound the shoelace binding the girl's hair and braided it into two strands, singing softly as she worked. She tied the ends with bows of purple crêpe paper. "Death can't come for you when you're looking pretty as that," she murmured.

Towhead fell asleep again.

There came a subdued knock at the door. States arose and drew it open. A lanky figure from one of whose eyes the moonlight was reflected with unnatural brightness stood in the doorway. It was Buttereye.

The pilot awkwardly took off his cap. "How's she getting on?" he asked softly.

States made no answer.

Buttereye shifted uneasily under the boy's steady, searching gaze. He spat a mouthful of tobacco against a tree, an act which afforded him a chance to turn his face, then took out his eye and began to clean it nervously. "Captain Lilly sent me over," he said at length, hesitatingly. "He'd have come himself, but he's all broke up." He held out a large basket from whose fruit-covered top peered out a shadowy ham and the smooth browned back of a roast chicken.

The boy made no move to accept it.

MISSISSIPPI

"Oh, I know it ain't easy to forgive him for what he done, States. It's a terrible thing. But I tell you he was just crazy and getting crazier and crazier all the time. All kind of tight inside. Same way as them watches you used to get with a two-pants' suit down at the Mammoth Store. You'd wind 'em tighter and tighter until finally the whole inside blowed up. The blowing-up's cured him of his crazy spell, 'cause when he heard about Towhead being in the shanty, he cried just like a baby. He sent me over to tell you he'd pay for the best doctor there is in Pine City."

"We don't need no help from him. Not his doctoring nor his money nor his baskets neither." He started to step back into the dim-lit interior.

Aunt Vergie, who had hobbled forward, blocked his retreat. "You ain't got no sense at all, States," she said, her eyes fixed on the basket, where a movement of the pilot's hand had caused the chicken to turn on its side, revealing its crisp immensity. "We don't have to take no money or doctoring if you don't want to. Blood money poisons them that takes it, they says, and we got as fine a doctor as there is. But to send away a basket with a chicken like that in it 'd be a sin. Chicken's just what Towhead needs to get her well."

MISSISSIPPI

Trembling with eagerness, she took the basket from the pilot's outstretched arm, and setting it down beside her, began feverishly exploring its contents.

Buttereye watched her, fascinated, a moment, then turned to the boy again. "He's waiting to know," he said. "'Cause if you want the doctor, he'll take the boat down to Pine City to get him tonight. What'll I say?"

States took out his watch and thoughtfully looked at the locket where the dog's and the girl's hair lay now intermingled.

A tree came floating down the stream and passed by the window, its wet leaves reflecting the moonlight like the sails of some phantom schooner. It thudded gently against the shanty and awakened the girl within. A sound of suppressed coughing followed.

States returned the watch to his pocket. "You can tell him I'm going to marry her," he said.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE marriage a week later occasioned a riotous celebration, at which Aunt Vergie consumed the second of her gold-banded cigar stubs and White Johnny swore with a jug in his hand that henceforth States would be as his brother. Then it was forgotten.

Towhead's convalescence through the damp river winter was slow, but when the spring spiders were building their webs in every shanty corner, only a

MISSISSIPPI

slight pallor and an occasional subdued cough remained to mark her injuries.

With the accident the bitterness between Captain Lilly and the shanty-boaters lessened. The feud soon after seemed to come to a complete end as a mysterious stranger suddenly appeared in the streets of Beaver Slough and White Johnny vanished up the river. Twice the captain sought to bring the boy back to the steamer, once through Buttereye, whom he sent to the shanty on Christmas Day staggering under a load of clothing and canned goods, once by a visit himself a year later when Towhead gave birth to a son. But each time the boy stoically refused.

The child, which at Aunt Vergie's urging was christened Moss for one of her long-dead brothers, arrived in a week that began a slow, steady rise of the river. By the time five months had passed and the baby was able to sit in a corner gurgling over the shoe-mending of the now venerable Professor Jacks, the button factory, unprotected by the levee, was a bleak island in a sluggish yellow lake and the drawling conversation at every shanty supper table was how high the water would climb before the flood reached its crest.

They had other things to talk of as well, how-

MISSISSIPPI

ever, for one morning, as though he had floated on one of the logs now drifting constantly down the stream, White Johnny reappeared and took possession of his rickety dwelling. The single knife scar on his cadaverous face had now increased to two, his hair was again clipped with the naked shortness reminiscent of a prison barber shop, his limp had aggravated, and at the ankle was tied a dirty rag as though to cover a wound made by renewed acquaintance with a galling ball and chain. The newcomer had been in his home only one night when he was joined by two men with hard, pock-marked faces and accents foreign to Beaver Slough.

Within a week of their arrival the drugstore was broken into and the till rifled; in a single night a few days later Capps' barber shop was looted and the wharfboat of the Morning Glory robbed of a large portion of its portable cargo.

The morning after the double burglary, an event unprecedented in Beaver Slough's history, Aunt Vergie bustled off happily to town to obtain the baby's high chair which Mrs. Ash, the charitable wife of the judge, had sent word she might have. She returned with a tired step and worried eyes in marked contrast to her gay departure.

"I'm getting scared the way things is looking in

MISSISSIPPI

Beaver Slough," she said to States, who had halted his work an instant to take the baby onto his lap and let it pick the strings of a scarred mandolin with chubby, startled fingers. "Folks was mad enough before about all the stealing was going on, but that breaking in last night has got 'em all riled up. I was looking in the candy store window and I heard Pres Capps and Captain Lilly and some of them inside talking. Pres was going on mighty wild about what they done to him. Took a couple of razors, and that strop that actor fellow wrote his name on, and that chewing-gum machine made an alligator swallow a nigger every time you put a penny in it, and pretty near six dollars besides. And then Captain Lilly started telling about what they done to the wharfboat, and it sounded like he was madder than Pres. Judge Ash come in, too, to get some writing paper and they commenced talking to him and I thought I heared your name but I couldn't make out what they was saying."

She took out a box filled with oddly assorted buttons and bits of thread and began tying them as decorations to the arms of the chair. "Seems like Doc Laura went to Miss Goldie's pappy that had got the colic after winning the old men's eating race at the pic social, and he seen three fellows

MISSISSIPPI

sneaking up from Shantytown just about the time the breaking in was done. It was too dark and the fellows was too far back in the bushes to see who they was, but everybody's sure now it's the shanty-boaters that's been doing all the robberies. Looks to me like they're getting ready to run us out the county like they done five years ago. Beaver Slough folks is getting mighty nervous anyway with this high water. I knowed we'd get in trouble letting White Johnny bring them fine friends of his around."

"Guess we'll go to Nigger Skull again if we get chased, won't we?" asked Towhead, who was patching a hole in one of States' shirts with a piece of faded table-cloth.

"Guess so. We always has. The men figures it's a good place. But with this high water I sure ain't crazy about going there. That old levee around Big Muddy ain't going to last forever, and when it goes everything down in Nigger Skull's going with it. You'd think them town folks could tell the difference between shanty people like us and them friends of White Johnny's. But then when I think of that big house of Mrs. Ash I seen today without a flag or a stuffed dove in it, I guess there ain't no way of understanding them. . . . States, you

MISSISSIPPI

stop trying to make that baby stand on his head now. That's when witches get power over babies, when they're upside down."

He surrendered the child to her laughingly and went to the back of the shanty. Feeling a drop of rain fall upon his hair, he glanced up a moment at the sky heavy with somber clouds, then surveyed the great muddy waters which had transformed the once vivid landscape into a rippling monotone of brown, out of which the submerged trees shot up struggling limbs like drowning men imploring aid. He shook his head, and began pulling in his fishing-lines fixed to tomato cans bobbing a few feet from the shore. A government towboat passed, returning from some mission up the swollen river. He ceased his work to watch it, his eyes filled with their old longing, then as it drifted out of sight turned to his lines again. A great crane waded near him, gazing with grave, wistful eyes as he pulled off three fish snared on the hooks and tossed them into a rusty bucket. He smiled thoughtfully. "Way you're looking at me a fellow might think it was right what the steamboaters says about pilots becoming cranes when they die so they can come down and have their feet in the river and watch the boats go by like you do," he murmured. "Guess

MISSISSIPPI

it ain't so, but I ain't going to refuse you a fish anyway." He took one from the bucket and tossed it over the water. The bird caught it in mid-air and swallowed it in a solemn gulp.

When he came to examine the hooks again in the morning, the faint sprinkle had become a steady downpour. Dissatisfied with his catch, he determined to try his luck with a rod and line, and taking out the hickory branch which served as his pole, sat down at the bow of the shanty. He had been there only a few moments when the line jerked with a violence that almost dragged him into the water; bracing himself against the gunnel, he tugged fiercely, and after a brief struggle pulled on board an immense catfish. His eyes lighted with exultation. Quickly he dispatched it and carried it into the shanty, where Towhead was washing the oilcloth on which they had just eaten their breakfast.

"Ain't she a whopper?" he demanded gaily as he laid it on the table that she might see its length. "Bet she weighs sixty pounds if she weighs an ounce. Newt Pillow'll give me seventy-five cents for her sure up at the grocery. Maybe a dollar if he ain't got the lumbago. Golly! If he does we can get a lot of things we been wanting, can't we? You

MISSISSIPPI

can get that lamp-shade with the beads and the picture painted on it of the sheep running from the lightning, and Aunt Vergie can get some of them new candy brooms with the handles made of chocolate and the straw made of marshmallow, and I can get the baby a pig balloon, and maybe there'll be enough left to get me a pair of them dice cuff-buttons Zep Wethers and all of them's wearing. I tell you, even if it is raining, this day's starting out right."

He put down his burden a moment to fondle the baby, amid Aunt Vergie's protests again tried to stand it on its head, then threw the fish over his shoulder, and started down the narrow, half-inundated neck of land which now formed the sole means of communication between the shanty colony and the button factory, and beyond that the town. He halted a moment to watch the swarm of negroes laboring in the downpour before the bleak building, pulling up great packing-boxes round which the water was lapping, and dragging them inside, went on, and had just emerged into the elm-bordered road which a short distance further on became the main street of Beaver Slough, when he saw coming toward him a tall, shambling figure he recognized as Marty Light, the deputy sheriff.

MISSISSIPPI

The officer, who bore the nickname Possum because of his droopy, half-closed eyes and his slow, drawling speech which constantly gave the impression that he was asleep, shook the boy's hand heartily.

"Glad to see you, son," he said in a voice so drowsy it was almost hypnotic, as he wrung a stream of water from the ends of his red mustaches, which hung down like carrots from his slightly purpled nose. "Was on my way up to your house to get you, and walking out to Shantytown ain't no fun this kind of weather, excepting maybe for ducks or alligators."

States' face tightened in alarm. "What was you coming to see me for, Mister Marty? I ain't done nothing, have I?"

"Don't know as you have, son. But Judge Ash done give me this here summons yesterday afternoon to give to you, and I ain't got nothing to do but serve it. Was going to give it to you last night but I got to arguing with some of the boys in the drugstore about whether a angel had to study Heberew and Greek and playing music out of books, or whether he learned it all of a sudden same way as he growed wings. Ain't nothing like them spiritual arguments to get you to forgetting time, and before I knowed it was ten o'clock. So I

MISSISSIPPI

thought I'd let you get a good sleep and bring it to you this morning."

Bewilderedly the boy studied the ornate paper. "Can't read them Latin words, but she's a summons all right." He looked up at the officer helplessly. "But what I done, Mr. Marty? I ain't stole nothing. I ain't been fighting. I ain't been dynamiting fish. I sneaked into the show last Tuesday while the lights was blowed out and seen pretty near half that musical kitchen act. But they ain't going to give me a summons for that, are they?"

The officer's weighty eyelids shut completely, remained thus a moment as though he were asleep, then lazily reopened. "You got to talk about that with Judge Ash, son."

The boy's tense features relaxed a little. "There's done been a mistake, that's what it is. They give you the name of the wrong fellow. You'll see when I get there."

"Hope so, son. But I ain't known Judge Ash to make no mistakes about spelling."

"You'll see all right. When do I have to go?"

Marty consulted the dazzling enameled dial of his watch. "Guess you'd better be coming right away. About eight-thirty now and the summons is for nine."

"Ain't I even got time to sell my fish?"

MISSISSIPPI

The officer wrung a second deluge from his carroty mustaches. "Don't see nothing to stop you, son. Shame to let a fish like that spoil. Judge ain't sitting in Beaver Slough but two days this week and so he's got plenty to do before he gets to you. There's that fellow from Pine City got drunk yesterday, that's one, and that New Orleans nigger girl old Willumatta Allen says got her to put her feet in sulphur water, so she'd get unconscious and tell her where she had her money hid, that's two, and that ain't all. . . . Afraid you ain't going to get much for your fish. I seen Newt sweeping out the grocery when I come by, and his lumbago was looking mighty bad. He'll try to get it from you for a quarter."

They reached the store, where with Marty's aid the price was finally fixed at sixty cents and a box of soda crackers, and continuing on their way, arrived at the courthouse. Walking between the two cracked and scaly pillars that formed the entrance, they crossed under a dome where hung a majestic crystal chandelier from which half the pendants had fallen, and pushing open a door entered a room reeking with the tobacco smoke rolling up from a score of pipes and stogies. Here on the judge's bench a kindly-eyed old man was sitting, speaking in low,

MISSISSIPPI

soothing tones to two negresses standing before him. Marty led the way to one of the rear benches.

"Sit down here till he calls for you," he whispered, and as the boy obeyed, took a place beside him.

The negresses vanished. After a leisurely interval, their place was taken by a runty little white man whose gaudy vest and trousers had obviously been slept in all night.

The judge bent over to survey the newcomer, then leaned back and straightened the sprig of lilac in his neat, immaculate silk coat. "What you accused of?" he asked quietly.

"Guess I was drunk, judge."

The judge turned to a baldheaded old man writing with magnificent flourishes in a ponderous ledger. "Look at his hands, will you, major?"

The major put down his pen, and descending from the platform, peered at the prisoner's upturned palms. "Mighty well calloused up, judge. He's a working-man all right."

"That's good. That's good. Thank you, major." He brought the lilac to his nose, held it there an instant while he slowly breathed its rich perfume, then turned to the prisoner again. "What do you do for a living, son?"

MISSISSIPPI

The little man looked at his own hands a moment, and grinning sheepishly, thrust them into his pockets. "Checks cars on the railroad down at Pine City, judge."

"You what they call a mudhopper?"

The question caused the prisoner to start in delight. "I sure am, judge!" he flashed.

"I used to be a mudhopper myself. Just after the war when my father had lost all his money and it took all I could do to keep my mother and my three sisters from starving. Mighty hard work being a mudhopper. Start out early in the morning when it's still dark and jump up and down them cars all day long and sometimes keep it up all night, too, till it's pretty near morning again. Get so tired you just don't care about nothing. I don't blame you for getting drunk. Case dismissed."

The little man's cherub-like face became almost apoplectic. He took the judge's hand and shook it fervently, then hustled down the cuspidor-lined aisle, chuckling as at every few steps he stopped to gaze at his calloused palms.

States watched him disappear, and turned to his sleepy-eyed companion. "Guess he's going to call me next, ain't he, Mr. Marty?"

"Don't know, son."

MISSISSIPPI

"Looks like he is." But he shook his head as the major called out an asthmatic, unintelligible sentence, and two rusty farmers shuffled forward from opposite sides of the room. "Wish he would get to me. Then you'll see mighty quick it's a mistake. Judge Ash treats people right."

The farmers, joined by two flamboyant-collared lawyers, had just begun an argument over the ownership of a cow, when Captain Lilly plodded through the door and took his seat on one of the front benches. His wrinkled face was white, agitated. States' assurance dulled with foreboding. "Wonder what he's wanting here," he muttered.

The arguments over the cow became fervent, never-ending orations. The courtroom grew restless. The judge took out a gilded album and began mounting postage stamps on the wide pages. The captain uneasily laced and unlaced his right shoe, then finally removed from his coat a small green bottle in whose bottom was a tiny, half-completed model of a log cabin, and reaching a long pair of tweezers through the bottle neck, began to fit a wooden chicken in place before the door. States gnawed his lips and stared out the window.

The orators at last ceased their heated rhapsodies. As though a great bell had begun clanging in his

MISSISSIPPI

ears, States heard the major call his name. For a moment he sat motionless, frozen with sudden fright, then as a slight nudge from Marty roused him, arose, and trembling, limped toward the bench. He took a place in front of it beside the captain, who was thrusting the green bottle back into his coat, and stood waiting, their bodies so close together the boy could faintly hear the ticking of the old man's watch.

The judge wetted a piece of adhesive paper on his tongue and fixed it to a stamp bearing the picture of a giraffe. "Howdy, Captain Lilly. Howdy, States," he said.

"Howdy, judge." "Morning, judge." The old man's voice was high-pitched, wavering, the boy's was a tense, scarcely audible whisper.

The judge carefully pasted the stamp in the album, and directed his friendly eyes toward the youth. "Guess you're wondering what you're here for, ain't you, son?"

A thin white line showed beneath each of the boy's eyes; he could feel the box of crackers in his hand shaking. "Yes, sir, I was wondering. I was telling Mr. Marty looked to me like it was a mistake. I ain't done a thing, judge. I was telling Mr. Marty I sneaked into the picture show the other

MISSISSIPPI

night when the lights blowed out and seen pretty near half the musical kitchen act and—”

The judge took out another stamp and peered at it through his heavy, gold-rimmed glasses. “I’m sorry, son. It ain’t no mistake.”

“But what I done, judge?”

“Captain Lilly’s taken a action against you. Done swore out papers for what they call being a vagrant.”

The lines beneath the boy’s eyes became great ashen patches which swept swiftly down his cheeks and up his forehead. He felt the courtroom grow immense, hazy; dizzily saw it begin to whirl like a smoky crystal in which the brass cuspidors shone out like stars. The whirling ceased. He put his fingers to his blurred eyes and rubbed them dazedly, realized that his broken tooth had recommenced its old fiery agony, and dully packed a piece of chewing-gum about the root.

The judge reached down and patted his shoulder. “Stay quiet a minute till it gets better, son.” He held out a stamp to the old man. “You’re up at Mace Bugg’s hotel pretty near every day, cap. Has Mace got a stamp like that?”

“Don’t know, judge. I seen him have lots of monkey ones and a couple of zebra ones, but don’t remember seeing no elephants.”

MISSISSIPPI

"Next time you're talking to him let him kind of know I'd like to trade him an elephant one for a zebra, will you?"

He slipped the stamp back into the envelope. "Looks like States' tooth ain't so bad now. Guess you'd better tell him what you was telling me day before yesterday, so he'll know the law ain't treating him wrong."

Fitfully, rigidly, the old man's withered fingers picked at the cork in the green bottle neck projecting out of his pocket. A shirtless negro in a ragged silk hat shambled out the drugstore opposite the courthouse, and sheltered from the rain by a dripping awning, began shrilly playing an ocarina. The old man turned mechanically to listen. "You know about my losing my little baby, judge. And you know about my adopting States and bringing him up just as if he was my own. You know about it better than anybody else. 'Cause it was you give me the papers to get him. I done what I said I'd do when I signed them papers, judge. I give him food when he was hungering and drink when he was thirsting. I watched over him in the daytime when he was playing and prayed over him at night when he was ailing.

"Nobody except the Lord knows how I got to

MISSISSIPPI

love that boy, judge. Growed up to be a fine boy, too, as fine a boy as anybody ever seen. And he was growing up to be a fine pilot too. The old-time kind of pilot that loves the river like—well, like that old blind man in Pine City loved that shepherd dog that used to get his things for him and bring them to him in his mouth. Ain't many of them kind of steamboaters left nowadays. Many a time I used to sit back in the pilot-house of the Morning Glory, when the logs was so thick in the river it looked like you couldn't get a elm leaf between them, and watch him take her through without scraping a fly-speck of paint off her paddle. And then I'd get out my Bible and read some of the sad parts to keep myself from getting too proud having a son like him that I could leave the Morning Glory to when I died . . . And then he left me."

Under the constant pressure of his fingers the cork was slipping far down into the neck of the bottle. He did not notice and drearily continued his fitful plucking. "When he done that, judge, I felt like—well, kind of like a swallow that had a nest near the Morning Glory was looking one evening when she come home to the three little birds that was in it and seen a big branch had fell on them and they was all dead. I know they was

MISSISSIPPI

his own people he went back to. But they was shanty people, bad people. And he don't belong with no bad people. I trained him different. States is good."

He paused and wiped his face with his handkerchief.

The negro outside continued his piercing serenade, now accompanying it with an enthusiastic shuffling of his great feet. The judge listened and beckoned to the deputy. "Give that nigger out there a nickel for me, will you, Marty? He's playing mighty pretty this morning."

The deputy vanished. Captain Lilly watched the negro's feet whirl faster as the coin clinked onto the pavement, and dully resumed his speech. "States is good, judge. But you can't keep on being good forever, can you, when there ain't nothing around you but stealing and law-breaking? Before he got married, all the time I was hoping he'd come back to me, even when I thought I was hating him for a while and done the terrible thing I done. And even after that I was still hoping. But I been just hoping too long. With all this new thieving and these jail fellows from up North coming on the shanties I know I've got to do something.

"There's going to be something mighty serious

MISSISSIPPI

happen about them shanty-boaters, judge. Beaver Slough folks are just about boiling. Water's getting higher all the time, and plenty of people'll be moving out their houses in a day or so, and if there's stealing now, what's it going to be like then? States'll have to be on one side or the other. And I just can't think about him being on the wrong side. That's why I'm asking you to send him off to the reform school, judge. There's some fine teachers up at that school in Perryville, everybody says. The fellow that's got the phonograph store down at Pine City was telling me that the two trombone players in that band come there last year said to him they'd both been in the Perryville school a couple of years, and before they went they couldn't play a note. They can learn him a lot of things I couldn't. And when he's away from the shanty people awhile he'll get to seeing just what kind of folks they are, and he won't ever want to go back."

Once more the cuspidors like glittering planets began to wheel giddily in the boy's brain. The box in his hand crackled beneath the crushing pressure of his fingers. A stream of scarlet ants darted out from a tear in the blue wrapper, rushed about in panic a moment, then scurried frantically inside. Two gray cracker crumbs dropped onto the floor as

MISSISSIPPI

they retreated. With his lame foot States pushed them out of sight under the edge of a dusty strip of matting.

The old man drew out the bottle, and mechanically gazing at the cork retreating faster and faster down the neck, tried to pull it upward. His withered hands were shaking, his blue eyes were moist. "I ain't done this without thinking, judge. I ain't wanting to separate a boy from his wife and baby. I ain't wanting to see my own son in jail or just the same as a jail, even if they has good teachers. But I been figuring and figuring, and it's the only way I can see to save him. I done him wrong twice, once by not telling him who his father was, and once by smashing his shanty and almost killing the girl that's his wife. They was terrible wrongs, and I hope I'll get punished for them when I die. But this time I know I'm doing right."

Silence fell on the courtroom. The ants reappeared in a fiery parade on the cracker box and mounting up to the boy's sleeve began racing over the front of his shirt. He smoothed the ruffled edge of the matting dreamily with his shoe and let them go unchecked.

The judge thumbed a leaf of his album and watched the insects thoughtfully. "Bet they're Newt

MISSISSIPPI

Pillow's crackers, ain't they? . . . If you got anything to say, son, I'm ready to listen."

A second detachment of ants began climbing States' sleeve. One of those already on his shirt crawled onto his neck. The new attack seemed to wake him from his stupor. Putting down the box on a near-by chair, he caught the wanderer on his neck, and one by one brushing the others from his clothing, faced the judge stonily. His leaden stoicism suddenly collapsed. His lips began to twitch feverishly about his broken tooth; his eyes narrowed with desperation.

"Don't send me up to Perryville, judge!" he pleaded passionately. "I ain't done nothing to be sent to jail. Ain't nobody in Perryville but boys that picks pockets and steals from banks and kills people. Ain't as if I'd shot somebody. If I'd done that, you'd have a right to hang me or anything and I wouldn't say nothing. But I ain't done a thing against the law except sneaking into the show, and I got the fifteen cents ready to give them for that. I been leading a good life, judge. But if you send me up to Perryville . . . I'm going to do something bad."

"You ain't going to do nothing bad, son. Perryville ain't going to hinder you, it's going to help

MISSISSIPPI

you. Like the captain says it'll give you a chance to figure things out." He paused, closed the album, and glanced at the old man's fingers still prying numbly at the cork. "You're going to push her right down into the bottle, captain. Let me try fishing it out a minute, will you?" He took it from the other's rigid hands, set it on the bench, and thrusting at it a moment with a pin, shook his head. "Looks like it's fell in after all, captain. I declare I don't know how it done it. Bounced down on top of that chicken you was fixing just as if I'd throwed it there. Mighty sorry. Hope I ain't hurt nothing."

He turned to the boy again and resumed his gentle discourse. "I guess maybe if I didn't think it was right to send you, I'd find a way not to. Them lawyers up at the state capital says I'm always breaking the statutes. But I'm willing to do it any time if it does people good. Now don't you go to fretting, States. It ain't going to be for long. Not more than a year, I give you my promise."

The boy's temples became a blur of livid, throbbing scarlet. Then his head drooped onto his shoulders, his passion once more sunk into a torpid bitterness. "What's going to happen about Towhead . . . and Moss?"

"Don't you go to fretting about your family, son.

MISSISSIPPI

They'll be taken care of same as if you was here. Mrs. Ash and the Ladies' Aid's going to see to that."

"When do I have to go?"

The judge's face became troubled. "Afraid right away, son. If we didn't send you now, you'd run off or something. I don't say I'd be blaming you. Natural for a boy to run off. So Marty'll just take you over to . . . to his house, and you can wait there tonight and get the train out from Pine City tomorrow."

"Marty's house is . . . the jail. You're just calling it that so I won't know what you're saying."

"Well, I don't know, son. I don't know. Guess most people do call it a jail. But Marty and his brother lives there, so it ain't entirely wrong to call it a house. Anyway it ain't but for one night."

He leaned over as at a sign from him the deputy led States up the single step of the bench, and pressed his limp hand. The boy drew back sharply as he felt a cold object touch his palm; glancing down, he saw it was a silver dollar. Silently he returned it, and when the deputy once more took his arm, rigidly began to move down the aisle. As he limped slowly along, each detail of the courtroom impressed itself hazily upon his brain: the framed motto on the wall where an embroidered

MISSISSIPPI

"Lead Kindly Light" showed over two bars of embroidered music; the photograph of a prancing Derby winner standing beside its flower-wreathed jockey; the captured still rusting in the corner; the baited mouse-trap at a hole in the shadow of the door. He neared the exit; turning to go, caught a glimpse of the captain still at the bench staring fixedly after him, while above, Judge Ash smelled again the lilac sprig in his immaculate silk coat and the major wrote a new magnificent sentence in his ponderous ledger and solemnly turned the page. Then the door swung shut behind him and the three figures were blotted out.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THEY drew their coats closer about them to ward off the downpour and set off up the streaming road. A heavy wagon lumbered past, with the rain splashing in a myriad joggling rivulets from the tarpaulin thrown over the back. "Some more of them sacks coming up from Pine City for the levee," Marty drawled, after he had called out a lazy salutation to the driver. "Reckon they'll have to be filling them and putting them around tomorrow if it's raining up the river the way it is here. Water's mighty close to the top now."

They neared an iron-barred building fronted by a plot of moldy grass and a paintless picket fence on whose gate three licorice-smeared children were swinging. Here they halted, and as the children fled behind a tree to watch in delighted terror, turned up the path, and clanged through the great iron door that led inside the gloomy structure. Up a cobwebbed stairway they climbed, and stumbling to the end of a barred corridor, white with the plaster dropping from the crumbling ceiling, entered a murky cell.

MISSISSIPPI

The boy shivered as he gazed round the dreary interior. Moving to the glassless window, he stared out over the bleak, unpaved court below where two blighted hollyhocks and a shabby sunflower feebly tried to lift their leaves to the melancholy sky. Dazedly he saw the deputy's keys twisting in his lazy fingers and heard his cheerful promise to return at noon with food, then as he found himself alone, crumpled onto a broken stool and buried his face in his hands.

Half an hour he remained thus, soundless, motionless. A noise in the courtyard roused him. Moving to the window again he saw a dwarfish, long-eared negro chopping at the ground about the hollyhocks with a hoe. Vacantly his eyes drifted about the objects in the enclosure: the toolshed in the corner with a great brownish stain on the wall where rust-laden water had dripped from the roof, the three empty garbage-cans set before it, the torn shirt hanging on a line. While he looked the courtyard slowly faded; the toolshed blurred mistily and reappeared as the shanty, the shirt metamorphosed into one of Towhead's forlorn dresses, the garbage-cans became his buckets full of mussels. As though he were a stranger gazing through the open door he saw his home as he had left it a few hours be-

MISSISSIPPI

fore, saw Towhead again standing at the table, watching in delight as he laid the great fish on the cloth, saw Aunt Vergie once more coming forward in protest as he lifted the baby in the air to give it a new lesson in standing upside down.

The picture vanished. His head began to ache hotly, his rubber collar seemed a band of flame. He took it off and wet his neck with water from a dented basin. Returning to the window, he stared at the negro now plying a muddy rake, and gnawed his lips until they were raw. An idea struck him; his eyes narrowed furtively. Walking to the cell-door, he glanced cautiously down the corridor, and began to test the rusty bars. One near the center rattled slightly as he took it in his hand. Eagerly he climbed upon the stool to explore the joint where it fitted into the steel at the top and shook it once more, vigorously. A tiny shower of rust flakes dropped upon his hair. One fell into his eye and commenced to pain acutely. Pressing his handkerchief over it, he went on with his examination, to find that the bar, though loose, was still deeply sunk into the frame and would defy his attacks for months. He turned his attention to the window grating; here, too, perceived that all his efforts to break or twist the steel would avail him nothing.

MISSISSIPPI

He shifted his gaze to the gardener, who had ceased his labors and was now at a cell near the toolshed, tickling with a piece of grass a naked brown foot projecting through the grill work. Forlornly he watched as the tawny toes twisted responsively at each feathery touch, a spectacle that each time sent the wielder of the grass into an ecstasy of giggling; smiled wanly as the irritated foot came to abrupt life and gave the tormentor a kick which sent him spinning dizzily into the mud.

States turned as the commotion caused a sleepy stir to arise from the cell across the corridor from his own, a cell which like all the others on the upper floor of the prison until now had seemed deserted. A little man with a head shaped like an eggplant appeared at the grating, clad in an enormous suit of red underwear, which hung down in immense leaden folds from his skinny frame. His abnormally bright blue eyes squinted amiably as they faced the boy and the light.

"Damn them niggers," he remarked mildly, as he scratched a bagging scarlet leg and continued his genial survey of the youth. "Fellow goes to all the trouble of taking off his clothes and then can't get no sleep anyway. These here little jails is always

MISSISSIPPI

like that. . . . Hum. . . . You're just a baby, ain't you, son?"

The presence of a human being sharing his captivity brought a faint light to the boy's ashen cheeks. He pressed his face tightly against the bars, as animals on bitter winter nights huddle together for warmth. "I didn't know you was there," he said.

"Well, I am, son. And I guess I'll be here a couple of weeks longer if the fleas ain't got me clean eat up before."

"I ain't seen no fleas." In spite of his wretchedness the boy's voice was faintly touched with local pride. "I heard fellows say when it was built there wasn't no better jail in the state. 'Course it ain't as big as some."

"The fleas is," the other replied quickly. "Got a cigarette?"

"Nope. But got some chewing."

"Give me some, will you?"

The boy sliced off a generous section of the plug of tobacco in his pocket and tossed it through the bars. The other caught it deftly. Both took seats on their dilapidated stools and began to chew.

The bright-eyed man took out a needle such as cobblers use to stitch shoes and with it began mend-

MISSISSIPPI

ing a wide hole in the scarlet fold drooping from his knee. "What they got you in for, son?"

"They done me wrong."

"How come they done you wrong?"

States began to tell him with forced calmness. But his coolness little by little vanished as he proceeded with his recital. As he ended his eyes were once more bitter, leaden; his face was again set in a somber, stony daze.

The underworn man grew grave. "Them's bad things he done to you, son. Any of them's mighty bad. Put all together they're just about the worst I ever heard of, and traveling around in jails the way I'm doing all the time, I've met plenty of people just passes their lives getting treated wrong." He completed his stitching of the patch and cut the thread with his tobacco-stained teeth. "If a fellow done that to you, looks to me there ain't but one thing you ought to do. . . . You ought to kill him."

States made no answer.

There was a step down the corridor. The deputy appeared carrying two tin plates, on each of which was a chunk of grayish meat and a half-loaf of soggy bread. The scarlet one ate voraciously. States let his portion remain in the corner untouched. A

MISSISSIPPI

word from the other caused him to pick it up; spearing the murky repast with a stick, he slipped it through the bars and reached it across the passageway. As these new provisions also disappeared the bright-eyed man grew garrulous, and expansively began to tell of his far-flung wanderings. The boy commented in monosyllables, brightening occasionally as the narration of some bizarre adventure caught him briefly in its spell.

The story-telling ceased. The underworn man found a tattered newspaper and with the aid of a stumbling finger commenced to read. States took out a knife and dully scraped off the clay drying on his shoes. "Fellow's right," he muttered to himself. "I ought to kill him."

The afternoon passed slowly. The boy felt a pang of hunger. Remembering the box of crackers he had brought with him from the courtroom, he shook a half-dozen free of ants, tossed a few into the cell opposite, and absently began to eat. A movement of his fellow captive drew his attention to the window once more. Looking out, he saw the negro of the tickled foot dolefully rolling a pair of dice made of lumps of sugar apparently spotted with soot.

"Give us some fun there, big fellow!" the un-

MISSISSIPPI

derwearer man shouted. "Talk to them dice a little!"

The negro shook his head sadly and turned out his pockets to show their emptiness. "How you going to talk to 'em when there ain't nothing to talk to 'em about, boss?" he asked dismally.

The boy watched the melancholy pastime until the dice became hazy with approaching darkness, then moved to the door as the deputy appeared to set a reeking lantern in the hall and brought his supper. Cutting off a slice of the watery pork which comprised the meal, States speared the remainder on the stick and stretched it out to his companion. The other seized it delightedly; when it had disappeared, again resumed his lively chatter. But finding the boy still responding only in monosyllables if at all, he gave up the attempt at conversation, and stretched out on his cot to sleep.

States took the paper which the other had handed him and by the feeble light of the lantern slowly scanned the greasy pages. A shadow whisked past him and darted toward a corner. With a start he jumped to his feet and saw a tiny mouse crouching in panic against the wall. Its terror moved him to pity. Taking a new cracker from the package, he crumbled it on the floor and walked away.

MISSISSIPPI

He felt a tickling on his arm which he knew meant that another ant had climbed there and examining the crackers closely, saw that the few remaining in the box were swarming with the insects. He hesitated a moment, then carried it across the cell and laid it down quietly near the mouse still rigid in fear against the stones. A moment later the paper rustled faintly, and he knew that its terror had succumbed to appetite.

Visions of the shanty again passed in misty procession through his brain. A new mood of desperation seized him. With feverish eyes he began reexamining the door which he had gone over so laboriously hours before; finding himself once more thwarted, shook the loose bar with an hysterical fury which sent the mouse flying out the room and filled the air about him with a sneezing rain of mortar and rust.

The noise brought the underwared man in a tousled red knot from his bed. Curiously he gazed at the boy now leaning exhaustedly against the door. Then his unnaturally bright eyes softened with compassion. "Know just how you feel, son. But it ain't no use. Pretty soon you'll get used to it same as me. . . . Got any more of them crackers?"

"There's a few. But a mouse has been eating 'em."

MISSISSIPPI

"Makes them the same as the others then. Give them here, will you?" He caught the mealy fragments which the boy tossed through the grating, and returning to his cot, was soon emitting a series of weird, metallic snores.

States sat down on his bed and took off his shoes. Dreamily with a finger he probed a hole in one of the battered soles, then slowly took off his faded shirt and trousers, and in his underwear, climbed onto the moldy blanket. Through the window, above the pattering symphony of the rain upon the garbage-cans drifted the steamy whistle of a tow-boat somewhere on the river. He listened bitterly. "Fellow's right," he muttered. "I ought to kill him."

He had been lying there half an hour, vainly trying to sleep, when a volley of shots and a muffled cry came from that part of the prison which the deputy made his home. Such a combination of sounds at that hour meant something extraordinary, he knew; leaping from the bed he darted to the window, and with all his senses stingingly acute, peered out. But in the rain-streaked darkness he could see nothing unusual, only the roof of the toolshed rippling like a brook and the bowed, water-soaked hollyhocks swaying slightly in the wind.

A dog barked hoarsely, ending in a frenzied howl

MISSISSIPPI

as a heavy battering commenced below and a gate creaked harshly on its hinges. Three shadowy figures rushed out from the blackness and raced about the enclosure, holding up flickering lanterns before each barred door.

A negro began to shout jubilantly, breaking off sharply as one of the lantern-bearers cursed him in a vicious whisper. The courtyard became madly aw whirl with shimmering naked black bodies.

Another gate clanged stridently. Down the corridor came the patter of swift-running feet. Catching up his shirt and flinging it over his shoulders, States darted from the window and sped to the door, reached it as a cadaverous figure halted outside and raised his lantern to peer into the darkness. It was White Johnny.

"That you, States?" the newcomer panted.

"Um-huh." The boy's voice was cool as though the other was keeping a long-arranged rendezvous.

A key clicked in the lock. The door was flung open. "Come on get out," White Johnny flashed. "We broke the jail to get you."

As the boy bolted into the corridor, the underworn man appeared redly at his grating and drowsily blasphemed the disturbers. With an answering oath and a quick turn of the key White

MISSISSIPPI

Johnny set him free. Seizing the boy's arm he swept him down the bat-shadowed stairway.

"Letting out all we can," he flashed. "Learn them next time not to treat a shantyman wrong."

They sped through the prison entrance and darting to the road where Buffalo and the two pock-marked strangers who had been sharing White Johnny's dwelling were waiting, set out at a run toward the river.

"Got to get down to Nigger Skull quick as we can," White Johnny grunted, as they coursed through the bubbling sloughs. "People's heard them shots, and when Marty tells them what I done to him they'll be coming for us sure. Little Greasy's hiding by the courthouse to tell us when they're starting."

Round the edge of the town they raced, over the narrow, half-flooded isthmus to the button factory, where an old mattress floating off the dump washed spectrally against an inundated window, and arrived at Shantytown ablaze with light and resonant with the clatter of pans and thudding of boxes as the inhabitants hastily dragged their shore possessions on board. Towhead, waiting under the shelter of a tree, saw the runners approaching, and rushed up the path to meet them. Throwing her arms about the boy, she hugged him feverishly. He kissed her

MISSISSIPPI

tenderly, and with her hand gripped in his own, darted to the shanty.

Snatching a hatchet from a shelf, he crawled between the beaching blocks which held the hull high out of water and began repairing a ragged hole in the bow. He had nailed one board and was chopping a second to fit beside it when Little Greasy came scrambling down the bank.

"They're getting ready to start!" he puffed to White Johnny and the others who came darting round him to hear the news. "I was hiding in one of them big boxes in front of Professor Jacks' place and I seen it all! Everything was all closed up excepting the drugstore, and Zep Wethers and Doc Boaz and Captain Lilly and a couple of other fellows was sitting in the back talking, when all of a sudden Marty comes racing down the street with his head all bleeding and runs inside. And I heard him talking wild and seen them opening up bottles and things. And a minute later he come out with a rag tied around him and him and Cap Lilly and the others run off toward the jail!"

"They're rounding up the niggers got away," White Johnny snapped.

"Guess so," Little Greasy gasped. "Anyway somebody started ringing the fire-bell, and the volunteers

MISSISSIPPI

come running up putting rubber coats over their nightgowns, and pretty soon everybody got to crowding around the square. And Cap Lilly and Doc Boaz come back, and Cap begun talking about law and order or some other fancy words like that he said the shanty-boaters was always contrary to. And Pres Capps got up and said that was right. Before he was through a fellow started yelling about lynching, and Zep Wethers ran and got a bucket of tar, and when they was building a fire under it, Mrs. Jacks throwed a feather pillow out the window and somebody started ripping it open. And then I knowed it was time for me to be going. If you listen you can hear them hollering!"

He held up his finger warningly; from the tiny blur of light marking the town came a faint halloo as though distant hunters were calling in their wandering dogs.

The shantymen grunted and sped off to their homes. States completed his patch with a few hasty strokes of the hatchet. While Towhead and the old woman waited shiveringly in the rain, he knocked the beaching blocks from under the hull and as the shanty sank clumsily to the ground, slid it into the water. Eagerly he leaped aboard and scanning the flooring at the bow, saw two jets of

MISSISSIPPI

water spurting through the edges of the newly applied boards. With such a leak the vessel would be quickly swamped in the rough mid-channel, he knew. Climbing to the roof of the shanty, he pulled off a strip of tin and began hammering it over the spouting water.

The hallooing died away with a shifting eddy of the wind, but floating out through the rain again, came ever nearer. Minute triangles of flame appeared at the top of the low rise behind the flooded dump and began to descend in a wavering parade.

States pounded steadily at the tin. One by one the other shanties sluggishly left the bank and moved into the swollen current: the home of Little Greasy with its windows fashioned of automobiles and behind it the pitcher-crowned dwelling of White Johnny; the shanty of Nigger Sue with the huge wagon-umbrella flapping at the bow; the sign-daubed hut of Preaching Daniel, where beneath the faintly visible legend "Where Will You Spend Eternity?" the grim-coated devotee stood like Death awaiting an answer to his question.

The flaming triangles now resolved themselves into torches. States drove a last nail and hurried the two women on board. Catching up his pole, he had started to shove off the bank, when he saw Buffalo

MISSISSIPPI

bent over before his dwelling made of a derelict street-car, struggling desperately to lift it from the gluey clay in which it was embedded. Leaping to shore, the boy tried to aid him. But as the advancing red line broke to become an onrushing, fiery wave, the boy abandoned his futile efforts, and with Buffalo at his side, bounded back to the shanty.

Clambering over the gunnel, he snatched up his pole once more and as his companion took the heavy oar which served as rudder, with a mighty thrust sent the craft scudding forward.

A single vehement-sputtering torch arrived at the bank and halted. The crimson-tipped figure holding it put a hand to his forehead and peered out over the water. An instant later three others had joined him, the first a derbied individual carrying a bucket whom States thought he recognized as Zep Wethers, the other two men of sharply contrasted heights, who he believed might be Pres Capps and Captain Lilly. More torches came swiftly behind them. A pistol roared and a bullet skipped shrilly over the surface of the stream.

"Put the lamp out, Towhead," States whispered.

The girl obeyed.

The shot was not repeated.

The scarlet-shadowed raiders, ever increasing,

MISSISSIPPI

merged into a confused fire-crowned circle, which remained stationary a moment, then whirled blindingly on toward Buffalo's abandoned dwelling. The derbied man detached himself from the dazzling ring, rushed inside the shanty, and reappearing on what had once been the motorman's platform, rang the gong furiously. The crowd roared and hooted its approval. The bell-ringer vanished. A moment later a burst of purplish smoke issued out the stove-pipe in the roof where long before had been a trolley; lacy flames commenced darting along the edges of the windows through which passengers had once peered into city streets.

The mob now sighted the leprous dwelling of Hunk-o'-Bread Andy likewise imbedded in the clay down the bank, and sped off toward it. Here too a purplish haze quickly lit up the windows. Dully outlined by the glow a man raised what appeared to be a bucket high above his head and shook it at the disappearing vessels. "You ain't getting away!" he shouted tauntingly. "We'll get you down at Nigger Skull just as easy. You'll be thinking it's you instead of your shanties is afire before we're done with you. You'll be thinking you're a roasted chicken! Plenty of this here tar gravy for your backs and then some horsewhipping

MISSISSIPPI

for dressing!" He completed his outburst with a volley of profanity.

"It's Zep Wethers all right," States muttered. "That's his cursing."

Buffalo, forlornly watching the glowing skeleton which had been his home, made no reply. At length in a blinding shower of sparks its domed roof collapsed; the walls swayed luridly and crumbled in a fire-shot cloud of steam.

The shantyman's heavy lips quivered. "She come from St. Louis," he said sadly. "I read it painted on her many a time, just under where the rope was for ringing up the fares. Finished up on a May the seventh and she'd carry thirty-seven people sitting down. . . . Now she ain't going to carry even one."

A wooded bend in the river blotted the two burning dwellings from sight, and the craft began to speed down the racing current. A sunken log struck the vessel a glancing blow on the bow and caused water to begin a new spouting through the floor. Surrendering the oar to Buffalo, States took his hammer and again began to pound at the edges of the patch. But his labor was vain. The floor soon disappeared beneath a muddy pool which divided into rippling waves with each slight tremor of the hull. The flow increased as they scudded past Burn-

MISSISSIPPI

ing Elm Light marking the bar where Granny Fork ended, and plowed into the seething river beyond.

The two women snatched up buckets and began to bail.

An undertow caught the vessel and began rocking it from side to side until the windows seemed at instants to lie flat on the water; from the shanty interior came the crash of falling dishes and the rumble of furniture bumping against walls. The two women clung to the gunnels and bailed faster.

The rocking ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The craft lumbered into quiet water. Towhead put down her bucket a moment as her violent exertions brought on a fit of her old coughing. The baby began to whimper fitfully. Buffalo took out a plug of tobacco and spit over the stern at explosive, regularly timed intervals.

Close to the shore they bounded, past the Morning Glory winking her single red eye at the wharf, and swinging round the great horseshoe of Big Muddy Bend, poled through the flooded break in the levee into what a few months before had been Nigger Skull Swamp, but was now a patchwork of crazy-shaped, cypress-crowned islands rising fog-gily out of a gloomy bay.

For some distance up the inundated area they

MISSISSIPPI

proceeded until in the shelter of the unbroken section of the levee the stretches of land grew longer, wider, and coming to rest at a muddy bank where the other shanties were already anchored, dragged the boat ashore.

"I tell you I don't like this place," Aunt Vergie muttered, as she looked out over the somber landscape and began picking up the tinware scattered on the floor. "I got a feeling that being here ain't going to do us no good. If they want to come down here and get us the way they was saying, ain't nothing to stop them that I can see."

"Nobody's coming after us," Buffalo answered dejectedly. "All this here land south of Big Muddy is Lost Creek County, ain't Beaver County no more, and it ain't lawful for them to cross a county line."

"They'll figure up some way of tormenting us. And even if they don't start no devilment, there's plenty of other things around here that can. Things that ain't natural. Bound to be in a swamp. You're going to spend the night with us, ain't you, Buffalo, now you ain't got no shanty?"

The homeless man shook his head. "I'll be getting over to Little Greasy's. Two women don't want no strange man around." Mournfully he slumped out into the darkness.

MISSISSIPPI

Towhead found a broom and commenced sweeping out the mud settling at their feet. The exertion caused her coughing to break out afresh. States took the broom from her anxiously. "Don't you go trying to work, honey," he said. "You better be going to bed."

He lifted up the straw mattress he had bought her some months before, to place it on the cot from which it had fallen and saw that it was soaked with water. A hasty survey showed him that all the other bedding was in the same condition. Going outside, he searched about in the hope of finding some dry grass. But from every blade he plucked there fell a miniature rain, and he was forced to return empty-handed.

"It's this here swamp mist that's making her cough," Aunt Vergie grumbled, as she found an old coat slightly drier than the blankets and gave it to the shivering girl. "If we just had a sheep for her to sleep with, we could stop it in a minute. But if you ain't got a sheep, you ain't got it, that's all."

Towhead stretched out on the cot and laid the baby at her side. "Don't need no sheep when I got Moss," she said cheerfully and a moment later closed her eyes. The old woman yawned and throwing down a drenched coverlet followed her example.

MISSISSIPPI

The rain ceased and the moon shone feebly through a rift in the leaden sky. States put out the light and sat down in the bow to keep watch for a possible attack. The toad came hopping clumsily forward and snuggled against his shoe. He bent and thoughtfully scratched its head.

The moon disappeared again behind a cloud, leaving the swamp once more in spectral blackness through which long upright streaks of mist constantly floated, that wavering and dissolving, took now the shapes of fantastic animals, now the forms of grotesque men. A fox barked harshly in a clump of bushes near the shanty. The child waked with the noise and began a frightened whimpering. States took it from the bed and began rocking it to and fro, lulling it with hushed, toneless snatches of song.

From within came the sound of a paroxysm of coughing. States gripped the tiny fingers toying sleepily at his wrist and pressed them against his cheek. "It's Captain Lilly done brought all this trouble on us, son," he muttered. "That fellow in the jail was right. I got to kill him."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALL through the night he sat there, lost in meditation, every duel of the valley's history reenacting itself luridly in his mind. Dawn began to touch the cypresses atop the somber ridge at whose foot the shanty was moored. He arose and taking his rifle and a sack from the wall went out to hunt. Remembering the fox which he had heard during the night, he searched diligently for its tracks. But the advancing water had obliterated its prints, and neither in the woods above nor on the oozing islands adjacent could he find any living creature stirring. He abandoned his attempts at last and returned to the shanty.

Aunt Vergie, who with Towhead was outside washing some mud-stained clothes, looked with disappointment at the empty bag dangling from his shoulder. "I sure was hoping you'd bring back something," she remarked as she vehemently wrung out a shapeless stocking. "Ain't a bite anywhere to eat in the house. Don't make no difference about you or me, but Towhead's got to have some vittles

MISSISSIPPI

with all this coughing she's doing. If them Beaver Slough folks could see what they're doing to a poor girl like her and her baby, maybe they'd be sorry." She pinned the stocking onto a blackened line. "Wish I could get up to the button factory and get that fifteen cents that's coming to me. I'd buy some eggs or liver or soup-bones maybe. It's pretty near two years now that foreman's been owing it to me and he always says he ain't got it. And three different times anyway people has told me they seen the mailman bring him a letter had typewriting on it. That shows how he's lying. My way of thinking, it's folks like him they ought to run out of town instead of us."

"It ain't money," States replied gloomily, "I got that sixty cents Newt Pillow gave me. But I can't go nowhere to spend it." He moved to Towhead and took away the wash-bucket over which she was bending. "I told you you oughtn't be working, honey," he murmured.

He felt his gloom affecting the others, and after a moment's reflection, slung his rifle once more over his shoulder. "I'm going to have another try at it," he announced. "This time till I catch something I ain't coming back."

Again he trudged off to search the boggy island

MISSISSIPPI

and in the grove of trees above saw a chipmunk burrowing in a heap of rotting leaves. He shot it, and brought it back to the women. Aunt Vergie fried it and sat down with Towhead at the table.

"Ain't you going to have a little scrap, States?" the girl asked wistfully.

He gazed at the minute animal and shook his head. "Ain't feeling like it," he lied. "I ate some red berries I found, and they ain't set on my stomach right."

Mounting to the woods again he decided to climb one of the trees, and perched on a lofty limb, looked out over the swollen yellow sea surging oilily where once had been the valley, a sea in which Beaver Slough, surrounded by its circular yellow dike, seemed to float like a giant curious-spotted egg, while below it the old levee around Big Muddy stretched out like a snake coiling to strike and swallow it, but which, detected in its purpose, had been severed near its tail again and again with a sword. Distantly he could see in miniature the green dome of the courthouse and the squat brick steeple of the Baptist Church; nearer, on the Morning Glory anchored at her wharf, he could distinguish a minute Buttereye standing over a minute sand-barge from which a steady procession of negroes,

MISSISSIPPI

like glistening ants carrying bread-crumbs, filed ashore with microscopic sacks on their shoulders and flung them down upon the levee.

The sun rose higher and higher in the sky until it was almost directly overhead. But he continued in his aerial seat, watching the drift sweeping down the river: wagons shedding bales of straw; a piano with a tall branch waving like a flag out the open top; a long, broken line of white picket fence, bobbing along in sections like the scattered skeleton of some great fish.

Hunger began to assail him. Regretfully he thought of the meat he had left untasted in the prison and the crackers he had given to the mouse. He broke off a pine cone and chewed the crispy segments.

A small boat came around the bend, and in one of the two oarsmen he recognized Zep Wethers. The craft neared the levee break leading to the island where the shanties were harbored, remained there for some moments as though the rowers were studying the surrounding terrain, then returned up the river. As it disappeared, from beyond the town came the whistle of the button factory announcing noon; over the waves floated the tinkle of the dinner-bell on the Morning Glory.

MISSISSIPPI

Clearly he could see the bell swaying back and forth in the hand of the white-aproned cook, vividly he could picture the crew piling into the trim dining-room and sitting down at the table golden with corn bread and brown with fragrant-smoking chops.

A curious object with two spotted heads which he imagined was a child's rocking-horse drifted toward the shore and snagged in a clump of flooded bushes. Going out in his skiff, he pulled the derelict aboard, took it to the shanty, and returned to watch for further prizes.

The drift increased as the afternoon advanced. A cottage wheeled past with a tiny blue windmill spinning gaily over the half-sunken window, to be followed by a freight-car spouting forth huge green melons which dotted the water like emeralds broken from some gigantic necklace. A barn roof spun down the waves, with a rooster on the shining tin peak flapping its wings and crowing lustily.

At the sight the boy's lips watered. Quickly he jumped into the skiff again and turned into the stream. But the swift currents defeated him, and the rooster soon became a gray, speckled dot that vanished in the blue of the distant willows. Twilight began to fall. He made another futile search for game and returned to the shanty.

MISSISSIPPI

Hunk-o'-Bread Andy was there, gathering up the clean-picked bones of the chipmunk.

"Still mighty hot in town," the visitor declared, as he climbed up the ridge with States to a spring and filled a bucket with drinking water. "I sneaked up to Pepp'mint Quigg's cabin a couple of hours ago to see if he wouldn't give me something to eat and was talking to him. Pepp'mint says they've caught just about all the niggers that ran away and now they're talking about coming down tonight and getting us. Some of them's talking about tarring and feathering, and others is favoring spreading gasoline over the swamp and setting it on fire and making us get that way, and Zep Wethers and some of them wants to cut through Big Muddy levee up near the top where she's so narrow and flood us out. Ain't nothing here to hinder them, no houses or nothing, just swampland that'd get covered. They was going to do it this afternoon, Pepp'mint says, only Judge Ash come up and stopped them."

He scraped one of the bones against the edges of his browned teeth. "Whatever they do, all of it ain't nobody's fault but Captain Lilly's. If he hadn't had you arrested, we'd still be living easy and peaceful up in Shanty Bend. I'm what the preachers call



*They've caught just
about all the niggers
that ran away.*

MISSISSIPPI

a holy man, States, a man that walks high with the Lord six days of the week and talks low with Him on the seventh. Amen. For twenty years I ain't missed a Roller meeting anywhere in this valley. Amen. And after all Captain Lilly done to you it looks to me like if you kill him the Lord's going to turn His head away so He can't see and there won't be no sin marked down in the book against you. More than that, looks to me like He's expecting you to kill him."

States filled his pail and trudged down the mound again. A damp darkness swept over the swamp. The two women went to bed supperless. Soon their regular breathing told him that they were asleep. Carefully opening a table drawer so as to suppress its customary squeak, he took out a pistol and examining the breech to see that the chambers were filled, cautiously tiptoed outside. Limping to his skiff, he loosed it from the sapling to which it was tied, and gripping the oars, began to row up-stream.

In and out the tops of the drowning trees he piloted the bobbing vessel, bending his head to pass under the arches of crackling leaves, or thrusting with an oar to free the vessel of the writhing mats of vines snared on the prow. Rounding a bend he heard the faint, rhythmic chanting of the blacks

MISSISSIPPI

toiling on the levee and a moment later saw the lights of the Morning Glory. His advance grew slower, guarded. He crept closer into the shelter of the trees. Soon he passed the angle where the old levee gave way to the new, and determining to halt here for a time, pulled into an inundated patch of wild corn at the levee edge where he would be safe from detection.

Through the towering stalks he could see Captain Lilly and the bandaged deputy standing a short distance up the stream directing a swarm of negroes shoveling sand into burlap sacks or jumping on them to press them into a solid wall; directly in front of him, so close that he felt he could almost touch the lilac sprig in his silk coat was Judge Ash, moving back and forth among half a dozen negroes who were cutting up great chunks of meat and bread or gathering fuel for a huge kettle of coffee steaming over a fire.

The boy's eyes drifted down the stream as three shadowy figures appeared out of the darkness and began hurrying off toward Big Muddy.

Then he saw Judge Ash turn quickly toward them and beckon a commanding finger. "You come here to me!" the judge called out sharply. The figures halted. After a moment's hesitation one of

MISSISSIPPI

them came swaggering forward. States caught sight of an arrogant derby and knew it was Zep Wethers.

"What you wanting, judge?" the newcomer asked flippantly.

"You was going to Big Muddy, again, wasn't you?"

Zep chewed the end of his unlit cigar and shuffled uneasily. A hushed chuckle from one of the negroes at the fire caused him to turn and see a circle of black faces staring intently to learn what he would do. With a sudden vicious grunt, he shot his head toward them, at the same time causing the eyes of a nickeled cow in his coat lapel to begin a red, sleepy winking. The negroes backed away, giggling in delight. He set it to blinking faster and faced the judge again.

"I don't see why you're stopping me all the time, judge. Ain't going to hurt nothing if I cut her through a little. Levee ain't been doing no good for twenty years. It'll just flood them shanty people and make them get. That's all."

He paused an instant while one of the negroes, more adventurous than the others, came forward to see the marvel closer, and as the kinky head bent over, sent a stream of water from the cow's open mouth squarely into his eyes. He guffawed and went on with increasing assurance. "Besides, you

MISSISSIPPI

know them engineer fellows that was here high-water time last year told us we ought to do it. Said if we cut it where the horseshoe begins and let the river go right across instead of going all the way round the bend, it'd take a mighty lot of pressure off the Beaver Slough levee. I was down at the Busy Bee in Pine City day before yesterday and I heard a salesman telling how it's the bottling up of the river with so many levees and things that's causing all the trouble. He was eating the thirty-cent dinner and when he got the steak he showed just what he was meaning with the potatoes and gravy that come with it."

The judge warmed his gloved hand over the fire. "I know all that about bottling. And I know them engineers said we ought to cut it. I guess maybe we will cut it if the water gets much worse. But if we do, we'll tell them shanty people first. The water outside the levee's fifteen feet higher than that backwater inside and you turn that main stream in there all of a sudden and it's going to take everything with it. People's going to get killed. I don't want nothing like that happening around Beaver Slough. You get along now up to that sand-barge and tell Captain Lilly you want to do some work instead of standing here tormenting my niggers."

MISSISSIPPI

"I ain't looking for no work. Not while my pappy's money's lasting." He jerked his derby down to his ears, caused the cow to spit threateningly at another negro shambling past, and disappeared up the bank. The judge began inspecting the provisions.

Soon, with a turbulent hissing, the coffee commenced to boil. A negro hurried to it and ladled it out to the dripping laborers.

Two hours passed and the swaying ebony bodies began to lose their elasticity. Doleful grunts replaced the chanting. The commands of the white men came oftener, sharper. Midnight struck in the Baptist Church. The white men gathered around the fire and after a brief consultation gave the signal to cease work. The negroes obeyed with alacrity, sprawling out in grotesque postures on the sand-strewn wall. Judge Ash yawned and sleepily went down the path to the town. A moment later, Captain Lilly made a survey of the unfilled sacks piled in low mounds near the sand-barge and disappeared on the boat. Soon the levee was deserted except for the deputy and the distant figures who at erratic intervals were standing guard.

An icy wind swept over the water. Buttoning his ragged coat tightly about him, States pulled out of

MISSISSIPPI

the corn patch and stealthily continued his way up the stream until the dark hull of the Morning Glory loomed mistily before him. Creeping into its shadow, he made fast to the fantail and warily climbed aboard. Up the gangway he limped to the captain's stateroom, and gazed through the circular window. In the bed beneath the phosphorescent "Tower of Jewels" the old man was sitting, radiantly clad in a lavender nightshirt, and working with the long tweezers at the bottle-inclosed log cabin which he had brought to the courtroom. A long time the boy stood there—watching fixedly while the captain took a piece of green varnished wood and began carving it into the semblance of a pig—then reached out his hand to the shiny knob and turning it noiselessly halted in the doorway.

The old man turned to reach a piece of sandpaper and saw him. His silky, hornlike eyebrows gave a scarcely perceptible flicker, the spouting whale transferred on his wrist began a faint throbbing.

"Come in, States. Take off your cap," he said. His voice was gentle as the hushed lapping of the river.

The boy obeyed mechanically.

"What you wanting, son?"

The boy fingered the pocket where he had his

MISSISSIPPI

revolver and did not answer. Lividly two thin white lines appeared at the tops of his cheeks and spread out in splotchy triangles over his freckled face; lifelessly his glazed eyes rolled in their sockets like the eyes of one long blind. Then he spoke in a numbed, mesmeric whisper, the whisper of a man in a drugged dream. "I come here to kill you."

The whale on the old man's wrist twitched violently as the cords beneath it grew suddenly taut, then in a moment resumed its gentle throbbing. Coolly the captain took up the sandpaper and touched it against the head of the emerald pig. "You don't know what you're saying, son."

"I do know what I'm saying. You and me's going to fight."

"Takes two to make a fight, son."

"You're a coward, then. I'll make you fight me. You done me and mine wrong too long. We're going to fight and I'm going to kill you."

The captain continued to rasp the sandpaper against the wood. With his handkerchief he wiped off the powdery dust accumulating along the green edges. "You been drinking or something talking that way. . . . You'd better come here and look at this pig I'm making to put in front of the cabin with the chicken. You used to like things like that

MISSISSIPPI

as much as me when you was on the boat. I was going to make a horse at first but a pig goes in easier."

"I ain't been drinking. And I didn't come here to look at no pigs." The lapel of his pocket gave way under his twisting fingers and a long black tear spread down to the seam. "You been doing me wrong too long. Ever since the day I was born pretty near, I guess you been doing me wrong. Most any other fellow around here would have killed you a hundred times if it had been them you done the things to instead of me. But I knowed you was a old man and, like I told you, you and me had the same dog. . . . Besides, I ain't the killing kind. But after what you done to me and mine yesterday, there ain't no other way." He drew out the pistol and let it hang limply against his shabby trousers.

"Put away that gun, son. When I see you having it, it makes me feel . . . kind of like there ain't no God." The sandpaper continued its shrill rasping. "I know I done you wrong about your folks and about busting up your shanty. But sending you up to Perryville I had figured out with the Lord was right. And helping burn the shanties last night I calculated was the same way. The shanty people's been going against the law, making a mock of the

MISSISSIPPI

law. And the Good Book says them that mocks against the law of the Lord or the law of Cæsar, either one, is going to be whipped with scorpions and drove outside the city gates. I ain't no professor. Maybe them ain't the exact words. And there ain't no gates in Beaver Slough excepting when they put up the arch at fair time. But that's their meaning. . . . I guess I ain't a good one to do the driving out. 'Cause after I seen the shanties going away, and got to thinking about you and Towhead and your baby down there in the swamp, I was . . . mighty sorry I done it. . . ."

"You're always sorry. . . . You said you was sorry after you run your boat into Towhead. . . . But it didn't keep her from laying in bed a whole winter pretty near dying. And your being sorry now ain't keeping her from starving or stopping the coughs that's tearing her to pieces. Fellow like you ain't fit to be alive."

The old man's crescent mustaches stiffened. Sternly he laid the sandpaper on the table. "What's Towhead and your baby going to do if it's you instead of me gets killed . . . if I fight you."

"They'll get along all right."

The mustaches drooped again. The captain took out a Bible from a chest and began to turn the

MISSISSIPPI

dog-eared pages. For ten minutes he searched, poring at the close-printed letters, then shook his head resignedly. "They says you can always find something in the Bible. But I looked in Cain and Abel and every place where there was a fight, and I can't find nothing. There's plenty about a father sacrificing his son, but nothing I can see about a father fighting his son. Nothing for it, nothing against it. So I'll fight you. If I done you wrong, and that's the way you think you can make it right, I ain't going to refuse. . . . What you want to fight with? Pistols?"

"Yep."

"Where?"

"Up on the texas, I guess."

The old man pulled on a pair of trousers. With one end of the nightshirt dangling loosely outside he moved to a bureau, and taking out a pearl-handled revolver, slowly led the way up the stairs. They reached the unroofed deck from which the two stacks rose toweringly over the deserted pilot-house and set about clearing a space in the piles of brooms and fruit-crates cluttering the floor. The work was quickly finished. The boy limped toward the prow where a lantern shone darkly above the creaking gangplank.

MISSISSIPPI

"You was always saying I was a better shot than you was," he muttered. "Getting in the light'll even us up. I'm going to kill you but I'm going to kill you fair." He halted, and thrust away a tangle of broom handles jutting into his back.

The old man took up his post at the wheel-house door and began wiping off a streak of oil glistening on the handle of his pistol.

The boy's weapon clicked as he tested the trigger mechanism. "When you want to shoot? Drop a handkerchief or something?"

"Handkerchief's all right in the daytime, maybe. Ain't no good at night. I'll fix something." A glass of water forgotten on top an insecure fruit-crate near him was jiggling back and forth as its hazardous rest seesawed slightly with each vibration of the boat. He shifted the box so that its oscillations were accentuated and moved the glass closer to the edge. "We'll shoot when it hits the deck."

There came another click, louder this time, as the two hammers drew back simultaneously. With eyes fixed on the jerking, staggering tumbler the duelists held their weapons ready at their sides and waited.

A calf in a stall on the boiler deck below began to bleat plaintively. A mournful mooing came off

MISSISSIPPI

the shore in answer and the tinkle of a cow-bell drifted nearer.

Out of the darkness Shoo Fly came bolting, and hurling himself at States' legs, with frantic waggings of his tail began tugging at the boy's shoelaces; with yelps of ecstasy tried to reach his face. States lifted the dog in his arms and hugged him hungrily, while Shoo Fly's ribbony tongue roamed deliriously over his cheeks; then he led the terrier to the top of the gangway. "Get downstairs, Shoo Fly," he commanded.

The dog obeyed unwillingly, looking back at each step for any signs of the boy's weakening. States returned to his station at the bow.

The tumbler jiggled to the edge of the fruit-crate, for an instant seemed about to topple, then capered back over the splintery surface. From below came the faint laughter of negro voices and the soft rattle of dishes in the cook's galley, then the rumbling clangor of the fireman poking at the furnaces. A moment later a hissing spray of steam spouted out the safety valve, shrouding their faces in a damp, warm veil.

The vessel gave a bound like a frightened whale as some derelict glanced against the bow. The fruit-crate rocked violently. The tumbler leaped out in a

MISSISSIPPI

shining arc and fell to the floor, shattering into a thousand fragments. Together, as though they were two connected beams of some curious machine, the arms of the man and the boy upraised until the pistols were on a level with the rigid shoulders behind them.

The tip of the boy's weapon circled in an ever-narrowing orbit until the sight came to rest on the old man's breast. An instant he held it there, resolute. Then his celluloid collar crackled under his straining throat, his hook-on tie fell as one end of the collar pulled off its button, his pistol dropped limply to his ragged trousers. "I can't shoot you," he muttered. "I wish I was dead."

Miserably, while the old man's weapon slipped slowly back into its holster, States limped to the gangway and with leaden feet began descending the narrow steps; wretchedly he gained the row-boat and flung himself down in the leaking bottom. Stabbing pains shot through his breast and back as though he had been beaten with lashes.

The water soaking through his clothes shocked, then soothed him. He arose and bending over the side, again and again dipped his head into the rippling water. Drying his face, he took up the oars, and like a sick animal staggering back to its herd, began rowing to Nigger Skull.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE had proceeded only a few hundred yards and was nearing Big Muddy levee when he heard somewhere upon it the sound of metal striking against earth. Instantly his senses became acute. Hastening on, he discerned a shadowy group of men toiling with picks and shovels.

As he approached, a figure standing guard took alarm and called a signal. The diggers snatched up their implements and darted up the levee toward the town, as they ran giving vent to riotous, jubilant whoops punctuated with the firing of revolvers.

MISSISSIPPI

Sleepy stirrings followed the course of the runners. Dogs barked angrily in the distance. Negroes grumbled drowsily. A light showed on the prow of the Morning Glory. "Who's a-raising all that racket?" Buttereye's voice demanded wrathfully.

"Ain't us that's raising, it's the river, professor!" Zep Wethers' flippant, triumphant shout came in answer. "She's done rose so fast she's tearing a hole right through to Nigger Skull!"

With a bound, States reached the bank, and saw where a deep ditch had been cut almost across it so that only a papery shell of wall remained, a wall through which water was already oozing; with another bound he was back in the boat and rowing desperately down the stream. Round the bend he sped through a whirling eddy which spun the prow of the tiny craft until the trees on shore swayed dizzily, then he raced through the break in the levee to the placid water beyond.

"Big Muddy's busting!" he shouted as the craft dashed near a dwelling foggily at anchor. "They've cut her through! We'll never get the shanties out!"

Three times he repeated the cry, never ceasing his delirious rowing until the boat plunged to a wild stop in the mud before his home. Leaping out, he caught up the baby and the toad snuggled at

MISSISSIPPI

the foot of the bed, aided the women in catching up a few of their possessions, then joined the other shanty-boaters fleeing up the ridge.

They gained the top, and halting for breath, listened. A liquid echo, like a child's dropping of a mud pie into a bucket of water, drifted across the misty waste. A soft bubbling followed, as though the bucket was being slowly emptied. A moment later a hissing, screaming cataract was at their feet.

Back from the edge the shanty-boaters moved while the foaming torrent raged past, silently they watched while the hungry currents cut further and further into the borders of the narrow strip of soil which formed their refuge. A tree near which Hunk-o'-Bread Andy was standing toppled and swung off into the maelstrom, its tangled gray roots writhing like water-snakes. The shantyman fell to his knees and began a moaning prayer. Preaching Daniel and some of the women joined him. Another tree and another twisted off into the whistling darkness.

"If it keeps on eating up the ground like this, it ain't going to have done us no good to come here. Get drowned, anyway," White Johnny muttered.

The voices of the kneeling women rose in a nasal

MISSISSIPPI

hymn. The men joined in hoarsely. A child crawled away from its chanting mother to a rock round whose outer border the water was racing. A rickety-limbed dog saw the danger and began barking alarmingly. The mother scrambled to her feet and snatched it up just as the rock was sliding heavily into the current. Another dog, with a hairless, broken tail, limped forward to join the first. Standing at the scene of the rescue, they growled defiantly at the roaring menace. A squirrel appeared in the lower branches of a tree and gazed down mystified at the sudden invaders—ending its curiosity in a flying leap as the tree shuddered convulsively and swept away.

Tiny fountains of water began to spout up through the soil and formed minute muddy craters. The circle of worshipers increased, the hymn became an impassioned wail.

The song ceased, as over the river sounded the whistle of the Morning Glory. Incredulously the worshipers watched the winking colored eyes of the boat come nearer and nearer; wildly they burst into a hymn of jubilee as her searchlight flashed and sprayed dazzlingly over the boiling water.

“Glory be to the Lord!” Andy shouted. “Glory! Glory! He’s heard our prayer! He’s softened the

MISSISSIPPI

hearts of the wicked! He's melted the swords of them that's against us to rust and changed the bile in their hearts to honey. Glory! Glory!"

He caught up a branch and setting it afire began waving it over his head. The searchlight swung toward it, bathing the refugees in a blazing white circle. Andy dropped the torch and rubbed his blinded eyes. States surrendered the baby to Tow-head and began collecting some long tree limbs.

White Johnny chewed his lips thoughtfully as the vessel neared the narrow island. "Guess we got to get on," he muttered to his two pock-marked companions. "But when we get near the wharf you and me better get off without bothering nobody to stop. Bile-changing's all right, but I ain't never seen it rub out no name on a warrant."

With a labored churning of her paddle the vessel cut her way over the billows and touched the mud. A line went overboard. The gangplank rattled down. The shanty-boaters began scrambling boisterously onto the deck.

The boy, unmoved, continued to toil at the logs. Aunt Vergie turned to him excitedly. "Come on, States. They're getting on board."

"I ain't going. I'm going to make a raft. Water's getting quieter every minute now. If the Morning

MISSISSIPPI

Glory can stay out in her a good raft can. . . . Me and you and Towhead can go down to New Orleans or somewheres. I ain't going to stay round Beaver Slough no more."

The coffin-plates slung over the old woman's shoulder clinked musically as she drew back in amazement. "Go out in that river in a raft? You crazy, son?" From the window of the cook's galley floated the spicy odor of frying chicken. Her incredulity changed to indignation. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself talking that way. Here you got a wife and baby ain't had nothing to eat all day excepting a couple of chipmunk bones so little a fly would have turned up its nose at them, and now that they got a chance to get something, you want them to go out on a flood river in a thing ain't stronger than a piece of floor matting. That there's milk-fed chicken, too. You can tell by the white smoke she's making. Comes from the cream in her. Don't you start arguing with me now."

She took his sleeve and pulled him vigorously forward.

He resisted an instant, then let his body follow her jerking arm. "All right. . . . We'll get on and get you and Towhead something. . . . I don't want nothing. . . . Then when you get finished . . . we got to go away."

MISSISSIPPI

With Towhead at one side and Aunt Vergie at the other, he stepped onto the gangplank. Slowly the trio proceeded over it, then came to a halt as they reached the end where at an opening in a wall of grocery boxes the captain was waiting, the loose fold of his nightshirt still dangling brilliantly outside his trousers. Trembling Towhead peered at him and took a step backward, her stiff black hat with its dilapidated red plumes drooping over the crown giving her the appearance of a frightened bird.

The old man reached out and took her hands. "You and States and the old lady go on up in the pilot-house," he said gently. "They're getting something warm ready for you. States knows the way."

They started up the stairs. The cat came stalking down majestically to greet them and purred against their legs. States caressed her spotless fur, then stopped to listen as the captain began speaking to a half-dozen shantymen gathered about a group of negroes shooting dice.

"Guess I was a fool for coming to get you," he was saying. "Guess I was about as big a fool as a fellow could be without getting lunatic papers took out against him. All I had to do was just stay in bed and Beaver Slough and me'd have been rid of

MISSISSIPPI

you forever. . . . Now you'll be starting up a Shantytown all over."

"Guess that's about right, captain," Hunk-o'-Bread Andy answered jauntily, as he furtively fished a can of tomatoes out of a grocery box and hid it in his clothes. "Black cat can't change himself into a white cat, they says, and same way you can't blame a blue jay for getting into one nest after he gets run out of another. With all this drift coming down, this time when we build her, we can make it the finest Shantytown there is on the river."

The old man shook his head in discouragement. "Guess I could make fine fellows like States out of all of you if I got you when you was babies like him," he grumbled. "But the Lord's got to pick somebody else if He wants it done 'cause I'm getting old and I ain't got the patience. . . . I seen you stealing that can, Andy. You put it back." He wheeled round to the burlap-turbaned deck boss at the rail. "Get 'em something to eat, Ham Hawk. And before they get off the boat tell the fireman to kind of look through their pockets."

He vanished into the engine-room. The trio on the stairway moved on toward the pilot-house. Limply States shook the hand the beaming Butter-

MISSISSIPPI

eye shot out toward him. The newcomers took seats on the brass-studded chairs ranged against the wall.

The gaze of the two women roamed timidly about the white-walled chamber, resting in awe on the ponderous ostrich egg suspended from the ceiling in a crocheted hammock, and the glass dome where a stuffed parrot was biting the plaster cracker lying at its feet. States' eyes remained fixed on the clanking wheel.

The old man entered and took Buttereye's post. He turned to the boy wistfully. "You want to take her awhile, son?"

States shook his head.

A negro appeared with a tray and began serving huge portions of chicken and baked beans. Aunt Vergie ate ravenously. Towhead, constrained, ate little, stopping constantly to cut off tiny crumbs of meat and feed them to the baby.

The captain watched her benignantly. "Mighty nice to have a lady on the boat. Was always telling States a boat ain't a boat unless it's got a lady on her." He reflected a moment, then reached into a drawer and drew out some colored sheets of paper. "Maybe while you ain't doing nothing you'd like to see a few of these here transfer pictures. 'A Trip to the Moon,' the first one is, and it's sure mighty

MISSISSIPPI

interesting. There's a lot of education in transfer pictures if you buys 'em right. . . . Want to look at 'em?"

"Yessir . . . if it ain't . . . a-bothering you." Her fright was giving way to an embarrassed eagerness. "I had some transfer pictures once. Fellow that was going to teach me checkers brought them to me. 'Going Through a Mine' it was they called them."

"I remember them. They was giving them away as premiums with that stomach regulator that doctor fellow was making down in Pine City. But 'course a mine ain't as educating as the moon." He put a second pile before her. "There's some more of them. And here's a mirror so you can read the writing on the ones I ain't transferred yet."

The mirror caught the baby's roving glance. It reached down a chubby hand to seize the flashing surface. The old man tickled the dimple in its chin. "That's a mighty fine baby. Redder-haired than its pappy, ain't it? . . . When the water goes down, you and States and the old lady want to live on my little farm near Hanging Dog . . . or you rather . . . stay on the boat?"

"We ain't going to do neither," States answered somberly for her. "We're going down to New Orleans. Ain't going to live around here no more."

MISSISSIPPI

"Don't you pay no attention to States. He don't know what he's saying," put in Aunt Vergie as she chewed determinedly at a drumstick. "Towhead don't want to go to New Orleans, do you, honey?"

"Wherever States wants to go, that's where I'm a-going."

"What's the good of his going away? If he stayed here look at all the things he could get you. Then maybe you could buy me a pair of false teeth like them I see the captain's using. Prettiest things I ever seen. Never know they was false if you didn't hear 'em click. Person just can't keep their eyes off 'em."

The cabin boy reappeared with a platter of sandwiches. The mound of beans beside the chicken grew smaller. The old man gave the wheel a quarter turn and faced the boy again. "Here comes one of them log booms you used to like to run her through, States. Want to take her now maybe?"

The boy arose, and limping to the window, peered hungrily into the blackness ahead, then slumped back upon his chair. "You can get her through just as well as me."

Through the cannonading logs they steamed, past a narrow bar at whose tip stood a great bird calling raucously over the water.

MISSISSIPPI

Approvingly the captain looked on as the girl pored over the transfer pictures, then reached into a cabinet and took out a box. "Here's one of them wood-burning sets," he announced. "Just got it down at the Mammoth Store a couple of days ago. I was going to get to work on it after I finished making the cabin in the bottle." With one hand on the wheel and one eye always expertly on the river, he lifted the box lid, and exposing an impressive collection of bottles and instruments, took out a curious-shaped needle. This he pressed into the girl's hand and set the point upon a black stenciled panel. Towhead's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"That there's a picture of what they calls the Capitol Building in Washington," he went on. "Newt Pillow, when he used to be mailman and went to the mailman's meeting there once, said there was more gold just on the dome of her than in both the banks down at Pine City. That's a-going pretty strong, but maybe it's so. If it was me doing it, I wouldn't color her in with gold, though. There ain't no other color proper for her excepting red, white, and blue. . . . If I just had a little time now I'd show you how to put fire in the needle and you could start her. Looks to me by the way you're

MISSISSIPPI

holding it you ought to make a mighty good burner."

Nervously Towhead examined the rubber tube and the metal flask in which it ended; delightedly, like a child who has just discovered the joy of a pencil, she began to guide the metal point around the outlines of the dome.

From below came the sound of a clamorous argument and a scuffle, followed by the voice of Hunk-o'-Bread Andy upraised in shrill protest. A moment later there was a yelp of pain and a hoarse laugh; then the musical tittering of negro voices rippled over the stream.

The captain clicked on the searchlight to survey the black channel. "Here comes another of them log booms, States. Want to take her now?"

States did not answer but kept his gaze fixed on his wife, now following her circling, hesitating fingers, now watching her wan, ecstatic face. A shiver swept over him. He walked slowly forward and halted beside the creaking hub. "Them wood-burning sets is expensive," he muttered. "Guess you better show Towhead how it works before she breaks something."

Setting his hands on the spokes he spun them deftly. The boat swung sharply in response. Soon

MISSISSIPPI

the explosive rumbling at the hull recommenced. The gloom clouding the boy's face began to vanish. His cheeks flushed, his eyes grew radiant.

The thunder at the bow ceased; the strenuous coughs of the engines subsided into a sleepy sighing. The lights of the wharfboat showed down the shore. The baby, now on the captain's lap, pulled at the handle of a bell-cord dangling above it. Fascinated by the faint, echoing tinkle which followed, it repeated the experiment. A snorting, uncomprehending curse came up the speaking tube. States grinned at Towhead and shouted down a jovial answer.

The boat neared the bank. The old man surrendered the baby to Aunt Vergie and hurried outside to direct the landing. Ropes thudded, voices called out noisily. A few moments later the captain reappeared, dragging in a long, bulky object enveloped in a dusty cloth. He set it before States and began taking off the cover. "Me and Buttereye made it together," he said in response to his guest's curious glances, a trace of pride tinging his voice. "We done it secret so we could surprise you on your birthday. That time when you went away. And when you didn't come back . . . I didn't want to ever see it no more. It's a mouth organ up at the

MISSISSIPPI

top and down at the bottom there's a bass drum and cymbals and a bass fiddle, all of them fixed onto a broomstick. Course all the drum ain't there and ain't nothing much of the fiddle except the strings, but you can get the music of all of 'em out of her, and that's what counts. Buttereye wanted to send her up to St. Louis to some of them orchestra fellows there to see if they'd get her patented and give us a dime or something on every one they sold. But I didn't have the heart 'cause you was away, and Buttereye after he got to thinking about it said the way them big people got big was just by stealing patents and things, so we didn't do nothing. I was thinking it'd be mighty nice if you'd play a little something before us and the ladies goes to sleep."

Rapturously States pressed his foot against the pedal which at one stroke caused a cushioned gourd to beat against the drumhead and at another sent a bent poker striking against a cymbal; lovingly he turned the dice which formed the tuning keys of the viol and felt the eight tiny trumpets projecting from each side of the harmonica. "Gosh, she's a beauty! Jiminy, she's a beauty!"

He became calmer and brought up a stool. "It's going to take a long time to learn to play her. Don't

MISSISSIPPI

know how long. A couple of months for the fiddle, and a couple for the bass drum, and I ain't got any idea how long for the cymbals. I met a fellow once in the Busy Bee and he told me cymbal playing was the hardest thing there is. Said he was about the best cymbal-player there was in the country and he'd been studying it all his life and wasn't sure yet he was playing them right. . . . And of course it's going to be harder playing them all together. But I'll try them now and do my best. What'll I play?"

The old man hesitated. "Well, 'course there's 'Drunkard's Daughter,' and 'course there's 'The Little Rosewood Casket,' but then there's 'Cripple Creek,' ain't there, and that's sure the best. I guess you better play 'Cripple Creek.' Socks and breeches wear out when you uses them. But the more you hear a piece of music, the better it gets."

His muddy shoes beat rhythmically against the floor as first the harmonica, then the whole riotous ensemble began to jangle out the melody. Gaily he danced the baby on his knee and chanted the refrain.

Aunt Vergie listened in respectful silence. As the concert ended, she reached into her apron, and withdrew her pocketbook filled with cigar-stubs. Hesi-

MISSISSIPPI

tantly she extended it to the captain, then in relief saw him shake his head in courteous refusal. Opening the innermost compartment, she extracted the single stub lying there, glancing a reverent instant at the flawless gold band encircling the brown surface. Slowly she set it in her holder, and with a sigh of deep content, struck a match.

THE END



UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



124 783

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY